

A muscular man with a dragon's wings and tail. The man is shirtless, showing his well-defined chest and abdominal muscles. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer. Behind him, large, scaly red dragon wings are spread out, and a red dragon tail with a sharp, golden-tipped scale is visible on the right. The background is dark and moody, with some blue and green light effects at the bottom.

# TAKEN BY THE DRAGON KING

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DRAGON MOTHER, BOOK 1

M. FLYNN

# **TAKEN BY THE DRAGON KING**

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## DRAGON MOTHER BOOK 1

MAC FLYNN

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Fate has a funny way of walking into everyone's lives. For me, fate strode into the town's pub wearing a dark cloak and a sexy smile.

I wasn't at the pub to down a few drinks and wallow in my sorrows, though if there was anywhere in my hometown to do that it would be there. The ancient building was rumored to have been the first structure built in the region, and had been filled with more laughter, brawls, and bawdy behavior than all the university frat houses combined. It was a place where everybody could go to learn the latest news around town and rest their weary feet before another doldrum day at work.

I couldn't do that. The pub was where I worked.

That night was like any other. Well, other than it being Friday and the end of a month. That meant the paycheck money flowed more freely and more people crowded the dimly lit, open-rafter room. The heady walls of solid oak smelled of cigars long smoked and drinks long spilled as I swung around the tables with my hands full of beer mugs.

"Hey, Diana! When you gonna serve us?"

I dodged a scooted out chair and almost spilled the contents of one hand over another patron. "When I'm done with this dance, I'll go join yours."

A young woman at one of the more crowded tables turned her nose up at me and scoffed. "If that's dancing then the sky is green."

That was Victoria Pierce, the richest brat in town. Her usual entourage of yes-men surrounded her like moths to an expensive flame. They were attracted not only to her money, but her raven-haired beauty and beautiful



body, courtesy of strong genetics and a penchant for hiking in designer boots up the many hills and mountains that surrounded our tourist-focused town.

The crowd at her table crowed with laughter and some pounded the top with their palms. Their glasses danced their own dance and some of the mugs tipped over, spilling the contents into their laps. Cries rang up from the table and laughter from the other patrons of the pub as the wet people leapt up and glared at their friends.

“Stop wasting the drinks!” the bartender shouted.

I couldn’t hide my smile as I swooped through the tables and delivered the mugs to some thirsty customers near the front door. The man and woman had the look of wide-eyed tourists, and the whiff of a romance in more than the budding stage. A map of the area lay on the table in front of them, haphazardly opened to the foothills of the nearby mountains.

The man smiled at me as I set the beers down. “Do you happen to know the area?”

I wiped my hands on my apron and grinned at him. “Born and raised. What do you want to know?”

He turned to his lovely companion and his smile softened. “My fiancé was wanting to know the location of Lover’s Pool.”

I tapped the map in front of them over the spot. Even the topographic showed the obvious shape of a heart in the features. “That’s not an easy hike.”

The man wrapped his arm around his beloved and grinned. “We like a challenge.”

“Don’t bother asking her about the places,” a voice spoke up, and the woman from the table appeared in my view. Her aim was the coke machine set against the wall near the front door, but she leaned her side against the box to face us and folded her arms over her chest. A wicked smile played across her lips and her eyes danced with malice. “She hasn’t been to any of them.”

The visiting woman frowned at Victoria. “Well, neither have we, but if anyone can show us the trail we’d appreciate it.”

“Oh, I know all the trails because I’ve hiked them,” Victoria bragged as she looked over the map. “Now let’s see here...” She scanned the topographic features as though they were runes to be deciphered. After a

strenuously long time she wrinkled her nose and pushed the map back at them. "Get another map. This one doesn't have any of the trails."

The man smiled at his lovely companion. "We were hoping to go off-trail and get there by the path less traveled."

Victoria shrugged. "Then I can't help you." She left, having not retrieved a pop from the machine. I suspected her saunter over here was a ruse to show off.

I turned back to the couple and nodded at their map. "I could show you an old glacier trail. Not many people use it, though, so you won't find any beaten path, but the forest service has marked some parts of it for experienced hikers to use."

The woman grinned. "That sounds perfect for us."

I was at the end of explaining the route, an ancient one which followed the scarred edge left by a retreating glacier, when the door unexpectedly and quickly opened right beside me. The portal bumped into my rear and knocked me a little off my balance. I stumbled forward, but a strong arm caught me.

"I'm so sorry."

The voice was deep, but melodious. I turned around and my jaw hit the floor. An incredibly handsome man stood behind me. He was about a head taller than me, with short sandy hair and bright blue eyes. His features were muscular, but there was a tenderness about the jaw line that showed he wasn't as hard as a rock. He wore a cloak over a black turtle-neck sweater and thick jeans, and hiking boots adorned his feet.

"Are you alright?"

I had to shake off my stupor but managed a smile. "I-I'm fine."

He grinned and released me. "I'm glad to hear that. If you'll excuse me."

For once in my long bar-hopping career I was disappointed when the customer strode up to the bar and took a seat on one of the stools. More than one pair of eyes watched his movements, and Victoria had an obvious case of curiosity.

The bartender strode over and nodded at him. "What'll ya have?"

"A glass of red wine, or white, if you have that."

"Sure thing. A glass of white."

Victoria slid out of her seat, but her boyfriend caught her hand. I couldn't overhear what he said, but his look was one of annoyance. She

glared back at him and shrugged off his hold before she strolled over to the handsome man. A cat-like smile curled onto her lips as she took up the seat beside him.

“I don’t remember seeing you before.”

The stranger smiled at her. “Because you haven’t.”

“I think we can find our way.” The woman’s voice shook me from my rude staring. Her eyes glistened with mischief as she jerked her head toward the bar. “I’m sure you have other things to do.”

I winced. “That obvious?”

The man laughed. “That every woman in here is looking at him? Yeah.”

His own companion nudged him in the elbows. “I’m not, now hush. And you-” She gave my hip a push in the direction of the bar. “Go on before that shark eats him.”

I snorted. “I’m not really looking for a guy.”

She gave me a wink. “Then maybe a guy’s looking for you, now shoo before I order something.”

I laughed and gave a lazy salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

I strolled over to the table that had earlier asked for attention, picking up a few empty mugs along the way. The table was as close to the bar as any other, and I was able to keep one ear on the stranger while the other ear took the orders.

“Come for the hiking?” the bartender, a large, friendly-faced man of fifty by the name of Bill, asked the stranger as he set the wine glass in front of him.

The newcomer took hold of the glass and smiled. “Something like that. I’m a... an historian of sorts.”

“Really?” Victoria cooed as she batted her eyelashes at him. It was her signature ‘cute’ move. “I love history!”

He raised his eyebrows. “Then you know about Dragon’s Hill?”

She shrugged. “Sure, who doesn’t? It’s not much of a challenge to get up the path, but it’s a good start for some of the tourists.”

The stranger cast a curious look at the bartender. “I believe your town has a rather old tradition of running up Dragon’s Hill on a moonlit night.”

Bill shrugged. “Never heard of it.”

I finished my ordering and scooted around the bar to fetch the drinks. Most bartenders wouldn’t tolerate a waitress behind the wood, but Bill

didn't mind when there was an interesting conversation to be had. "I think he's talking about the hill climb, Bill. The one that happens during a blood moon and ends at the rock shaped like a dragon."

The stranger nodded. "Just that."

Bill's eyes widened. "That one? I'm surprised somebody like you'd know about it. Not many locals have even heard of it."

Victoria shrugged. "Probably because it hasn't been done in, like, forever."

"One hundred years."

The stranger and I had spoken at the same time. I grinned and he smiled. "You know your history, Miss-?"

"Just Diana," I assured him as I filled a few mugs.

"And I'm Victoria," the aforementioned woman spoke up as she scooted closer to the stranger. Their arms touched, and she looked into his eyes with a promise of a bed and a long night. "What's yours?"

"Luca."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Luca! What a beautiful name!"

Her boyfriend's grumblings floated over to us as the entire pub listened in on our conversation. "For a dog..." A roar of laughter rose up from the crowd.

Victoria shot him a look of death. "Shut up, Doug!"

The stranger himself chuckled. "I suppose it is. Would anyone be interested in resuming that tradition, at least this once?"

"Why would anyone want to be running up there during a full moon?" someone spoke up.

Luca turned to face the room and leaned his back against the bar. "For the sheer joy of it, though I'll wager none will succeed."

Doug pointed his thumb at himself. "I've gone up there a bunch of times. There's nothing tough about that trail."

"There's supposed to be, at least during the blood moon," I spoke up as everyone listened. "Nobody's supposed to be able to reach the top unless they're--"

"-strong of heart and free from fear," Luca finished for me with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. He swept those eyes over the rapt audience. "Who is willing to join me on that excursion tonight?"

A few mumblings arose from the crowd, but nobody jumped up. Victoria wrinkled her nose. "That doesn't sound very exciting."

Luca bowed his head and chuckled. “Perhaps it isn’t, so I’ll make a wager. The first person to reach the dragon statue receives this.”

He reached into his cloak and drew out a sparkling golden crown.

This wasn't some off-the-shelf-at-a-dollar-store crown. It was the real, glistening deal. The crown was more of a circlet with a thick band of gold holding the glittering jewels in their place at the front. The half dozen gemstones, some white in color like diamonds and others of a deep green emerald, were arranged in an ovular shape that crested above the band. The jewels sparkled in the dim light and the rich, pure gold flashed like a lighthouse beacon over the gawking faces of everyone present.

Shouts rang up and everyone crowded around him.

"Beautiful!"

"Oh my god, I want that!"

"Holy cow!"

A question inevitably arose. "Is it real?"

The stranger smiled and inclined his head. "It is."

The second-favorite question arose. "How much is it worth?"

"Priceless," Luca revealed as he held it out to Victoria who had pushed her way to the head of the crowd. "But don't take my word for it. Look for yourself."

Victoria took the crown in both hands, and everyone gathered eagerly around her. Most gawked. Some eyes shone with a green glint. People pawed at the jewels, but they were all firmly wedged into their little cubby holes.

Victoria turned the crown over in her hands and a mischievous light appeared in her eyes. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say this looks like a woman's crown."

Luca nodded. "That's because it is."

One of the men wrinkled his nose. "So, what are we supposed to do with it?"

His girlfriend jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. "You could give it to me!" Laughter erupted from the crowd.

Luca opened his palm, and the crown was reluctantly returned to his hand. He tucked the tiara back into his coat. "What do you say to the event now?"

One of the men leapt to his feet and raised his mug to Luca. "I say happy trails!"

A great roar of approval arose from all present and many mugs were lifted, and many mugs were spilled. "Be careful with that stuff!" Bill shouted at his patrons. "It ain't easy to clean off these old wood floors!"

Scarcely anyone paid attention to him as they all jabbered away, each boasting or bemoaning their chances at the priceless gift.

Luca stood and raised his hands above his head. The room quieted so he could speak. "I'm glad to hear so many wish to participate. I know this is a local tradition, but others may join if they wish. We will meet at the base of the hill by eleven-thirty and set off at that time."

Victoria wrinkled her nose. "Why that time? It takes half that time to get up the hill."

A strange smile slipped onto Luca's lips. "You may find the going more difficult than you imagined."

Her boyfriend scoffed. "Because of the dark?"

Luca shrugged. "Among other things, but I'll leave everyone to decide if they want an adventure." He inclined his head in a most gallant way and strode from the room.

He was gone but not forgotten as the pub lit up with conversation. The majority of the people discussed the best speed to walk up the easy hill. Others bragged about running the whole way to the Dragon's Prize, the statue located on a flat plane at the top of the small hill. I'd seen pictures of the spot. It was beautiful, with a gorgeous view of the whole valley.

"Diana!" It was Bill calling to me.

I shook myself out of my reverie and turned to him. "Yeah?"

He jerked his head over his shoulder in the direction of the large clock that hung on the wall. The time read half-past ten. "We'll be closing early tonight."

I couldn't help but smile as I looked over his chubby form. "Are you going to try at the crown?"

He snorted. "Hell no. I'm going to stand at the bottom and laugh my ass off at all the idiots who try to run up the thing." He looked out on all the customers and raised his voice to a bellow. "We close at eleven, so get your drinks drunk and your asses out!"

The crowd dutifully obeyed and in fifteen minutes there was only a few patrons remaining to finish their large mugs. I was pleased to see the two visitors still seated at their table with a map open before them.

I sauntered over to them and picked up their empty glasses. "Will you be trying the Dragon Run tonight?"

The wife nodded. "We'll give it our best shot. What about you?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm out, but I'll be there to root you on."

The man draped his arm over his wife's shoulders and grinned at me. "You should join us. If Sarah here drops you can help me heft her up the rest of the way."

Sarah poked his stomach with her finger. "And the same goes for you, Tom!"

He patted his stomach and laughed. "I do need to lose a few pounds. Maybe this will help. There's certainly enough incentive."

Sarah returned her attention to me. "But you will come with us, won't you?"

I winced. "I'd really like to, but I-well, I really should get home."

Tom stood and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "If you change your mind, you know where to find us."

Sarah reluctantly rose to her feet and gave me a hearty hug with a squeeze. She drew us apart to arm's length and smiled at me. "It was nice meeting you, Diana, and thank you for being so kind to us."

I grinned and shrugged. "No problem, and good luck on the climb."

They waved goodbye to me and left. The clock ticked closer to the appointed hour and the rest of the crowd soon followed them out the door. Eleven o'clock came, and Bill went, leaving me with a few unwashed dishes which were quickly finished. I stepped out of the rear door that led into an alley and had the shadows to my back as I locked the door.

"Care to walk with me?"

I screamed and spun around to face the darkness on the opposite side of the alley. Luca stepped out of them with a mischievous smile on his



lips, but a hint of regret in his eyes.

I clutched my chest and felt my heart pounding hard beneath my fingers. A slight touch of pain shot through me, but I was too angry to show it on my face. “Don’t do that!”

He studied me with a look of curiosity. It was adorable. “You don’t appear to be in any hurry to go to the hill.”

I shrugged. “Hill-climbing isn’t really my kind of spectator sport.”

There was a touch of disappointment at the corners of his lips. “Then you didn’t intend to join the climbers?”

I shook my head. “No. To be honest, I haven’t actually been up there, or up many of the hills around here.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Why not? Do you not care of the scenery?”

I smiled. “It’s not that. I love the sexy man-I mean, scenery.” I inwardly cursed my unconscious blurting.

A slight chuckle escaped his lips as he set one hand against the wall by my head. “It sounds like you have some interesting scenery around here.”

I pressed my back hard against the wall and sheepishly grinned at him. “Y-yeah, I guess we do. I-I hate to ask that, but shouldn’t you get prepping for the hike? I mean, it’s not that tough a one, but it’s almost time and-”

Luca leaned close to me, and his lips brushed against my cheek. His hot breath sent thrilling shivers down my spine. “I’m comfortable where I am.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I-I think you have the wrong girl.”

His sultry voice tingled my neck as he moved up to my face. His seductive eyes captured mine in their heated gaze. “I don’t think so.”

His lips brushed against mine. My heart skipped a beat, and when it ticked again a stab of pain shot through my chest. I clutched my chest over my heart and gritted my teeth against the touch of agony. Luca was kind enough to back up as I focused on each breath, willing my heart to slow to a normal pace.

Luca’s distraught voice hung over me. “What’s wrong?”

I managed to look up at him and smile. “It’s nothing. Just a little trouble with the old ticker.”

His eyebrows crashed down. “You have a bad heart.”

There it was. The question people always got around to asking. I couldn’t blame them. My stupid heart problem always flared up when I got nervous around inquisitive people.

“Yeah,” I told him as I took a few deep breaths and dropped my hand to my side. “It’s something I was born with. That means I won’t be joining you guys for your race.”

“Do it.”

I blinked at his reply. It was almost a command. “Why?”

He reached up and brushed a finger against my cheek as his eyes searched my face. “Because I want you to win.”

I couldn’t stop the blush, but I did try to hide it behind a snort. “I think you’ve got the wrong girl if you expect that. Victoria has a better chance of being crowned.”

There was a strangely illuminating twinkle in his eyes. “Would you do it as a favor to me? There’s always the option of stopping if this-” He set his palm against my chest over my heart, “-complains, but I don’t think it will.”

I lifted my eyes to him and frowned. “What makes you so sure?”

He grinned and drew back. “Let’s just call it intuition. If you will excuse me-” He bowed at the waist to me, “-I must go officiate the race.”

Luca turned and strode down the alley, and in a few moments, he was gone. Gone, but not forgotten. I looked down at my shaking hand before I dropped it to my side and sighed.

“Well, here goes nothing.”

“**Y**ou’re here!”

The exclamation came from Sarah at my coming up to them.

They stood at the back of the mass of people that crowded around the bottom of Dragon’s Hill. Everyone from the bar and a few tag-alongs from the homes had gathered to try their luck at the chance of a fortune. Victoria and her boyfriend stood at the front of the pack with a smirk on both their faces.

Dragon’s Hill was a gently sloped ridge that climbed up some five hundred feet above the valley floor, though small compared to the towering mountains that lorded over its backside. The dirt path leading up to the top was surrounded on both sides by a wide patch of grass, but beyond those strips stood a wilderness of stones big and small, and the creeping encroaches of the forest that covered the steeper parts of the slope. The trees and the winding path blocked a view of the end, but I knew that near the top was a small plateau where the statue of the dragon stood among the creeping vines, waiting for visitors to admire its forlorn beauty.

The crowd quieted as Luca stepped out from behind a large boulder that sat to one side of the bottom of the path. He held up his hands and smiled at all present. “I thank you all for coming to humor me.”

A voice shouted from the group. “Humor nothing, we want the crown!” The crowd erupted in good humor.

Luca smiled and inclined his head. “Still, I thank you all the same. Now I shall lay down the rules.”

Victoria wrinkled her nose. "What rules?"

"Merely a few customs of the Dragon Run," he assured her as his eyes seemed to twinkle with a strange green light. "Anyone may make the attempt, but you cannot help another up the mountain."

Victoria's boyfriend crossed his arms over his broad chest and snorted. "As if anybody needs any help."

Luca acknowledged him with a slight incline of his head before he continued. "As it is, that is a rule. All participants must also remain on the trail. You cannot take a shortcut to reach the top, otherwise you will be disqualified."

One of the women near me snorted and turned to their companion where she lowered her voice to a whisper. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him."

Luca's cool gaze settled on her among all others. "I will know if you cheat." The woman's eyes widened in shock before she averted them from his accusing scrutiny. "Those are the rules. Does anyone have any questions?"

Victoria lifted her chin up. "Where do I stop to pick up my prize?"

"The finish line will be at Dragon's Ascending."

A murmur of confusion arose from the crowd. Luca only chuckled. "The statue of the dragon in the old fountain."

"Oh!"

"Right!"

"I knew that!"

Bill leaned close to Sarah and grinned up at her. "If I drop by the wayside, you have my permission to leave me to die."

She poorly hid a smile as she slapped his arm. "Don't be silly, Bill. I've already been given permission by the nice man to do that."

He started back and feigned a hurt expression. "My dear! How could you?"

"One step at a time."

I couldn't help but smile at their banter. It made me regret that I didn't have someone by my side to do the same.

Luca raised his arms and the conversations that had sparked up at his rules died down. "There is one last rule. You have until the hour of midnight to reach the top."

Victoria snorted. "Like we told you earlier, it only takes ten minutes to get up there."

A sly smile slipped onto Luca's lips. "Does it? Then you won't have any trouble reaching the Dragon Ascending." He stepped to one side and swept his arm up the path. "Now begin!"

The crowd turned into a stampede as they rushed up the path. Luca had to scoot a little further off to avoid being trampled by the eager hikers with golden greed in their eyes. Even the wonderful couple scampered ahead of me, though Sarah looked over her shoulder. I gave her a wave and a smile as I set off on my slow pace.

Luca stood at the bottom with his curious eyes watching the backsides of the stampede he'd created. The last of them were nearly out of sight around the last bend, though to be fair that was only twenty yards from the start line.

I strolled past Luca, but something in his eyes made me pause. "Aren't you coming?"

His eyes turned to me and twinkled with mischief. "I know of a shortcut." Those same gleeful eyes looked me over and their expression softened. "Might I add that I'm very glad to see you here."

I snorted and nodded at the top of the hill. "You'd better enjoy it because I don't expect to be seen at very many places along this path."

There was something in his expression that I couldn't quite read. A secret, maybe? Or maybe it was just foolish hope. Mine more than his. "That remains to be seen, but," He took my fingers in his hand and pressed a light kiss to the top, "may you have wings to give you flight."

I blinked at him as he turned and vanished behind the rock. "Wings?" I repeated to the quiet air. I took a few steps up the path so I passed the boulder, and curiosity made me pause and look back.

Luca had vanished. There wasn't a sign of him behind the rock.

I shrugged and continued on my way. I'd had all my life to pay attention to my heart. For me every step up a hill was a strain waiting to turn into something else. Sometimes I wondered if those speed bumps in the parking lots were meant as an obstacle course for me and not the cars.

This night, however, was different. Everything felt different. My heart pattered away, but there was no stretch of the old sac, no strain of every valve. I felt so good it was like being able to fly.

“Like having wings...” I murmured as I recalled Luca’s strange prayer to me.

Heck, I even picked up the pace and before I knew it, I’d rounded the first corner. Rounded it and tripped over the first victim of the hill climb. I let out a yelp and tumbled to the dirt trail.

A wheezing voice came from behind me. “I’m so sorry, Diana!”

I turned around and found that it was Bill seated only halfway off the path. His face was as red as a beet and his chest heaved up and down. Sweat had soaked through his clothes, and the tell-tale stains covered the front of his shirt and were tucked away under his arms.

He gave me a sheepish grin. “I know I shouldn’t be sitting here, but I thought I was the last one up here, and-well-I can’t seem to go any farther.”

I stretched out my arms to him. “Did you want some help up?”

He shook his head and waved his hand up the trail. “No, you go on without me. I’d look stupid in a crown, anyway. Now go on.” He gave one of my legs a light push. “You’d look good in it.”

I patted him on the shoulder and continued on my way. There was only a short distance to the next bend in the serpentine path, and I almost tripped over another victim of exhaustion. I caught myself this time, but my stumble made me crash into a different person than the one who had tripped me.

I grabbed their shoulders to keep from falling and looked up. My jaw hit the ground. Two dozen people sat scattered about the sides of the trail. Most looked sheepish, some angry, and a few were fuming. All of them showed the same symptoms as Bill, though many were in much better shape, and many of them were locals.

“What the hell is up with this trail?” one of them whined as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I just did it the other day and had no problem.”

Her friend nudged her with an elbow. “Maybe it was that donut this morning.”

The rest of the crowd burst into laughter, though more than one had a look of confusion on their faces.

“Hey!” one of them shouted at me as they pointed up the trail. “Get along with you! You’re actually in the running, and we don’t want Victoria to win!”

“Yeah!”

“Get a move on, Diana!”

I gave them a salute and passed through their number, feeling both more confident and more confused about what was going on.

Every corner of the winding trail brought with it a new set of exhausted hikers. The greed and wind had been knocked out of them by the trail, but with every step I found myself walking faster until I was almost at a brisk jog.

I reached another bend with a tall standing rock that I knew from maps was the three-quarter marker of the trail. A pair of angry voices stabbed my ears, and I didn't need to see their faces to know who they were.

Victoria and Doug sat in the middle of the path with Victoria a little farther up the hill than her boyfriend. He lay on his back sprawled on the dirt with his chest heaving and his angry eyes looking up at the starry sky.

"I said get up and help me!" Victoria wheezed as she tried to stand, but her shaky legs dropped her back down to reality, and earth. "What's wrong with you? We're almost there!"

He turned his head and glared at her. "Yeah, and I'm almost dead. This hill has me beat."

She picked up a clod of dirt and threw it at him. He ducked and the dirt flew harmlessly past him. "Don't be such a quitter!"

He armed himself with the same ammo and tossed it up and down in the air. "You want to see a quitter?" He threw the clod. Victoria wasn't as good a dodger with his better throw, and the clod hit her squarely in the chest. "Now we'll see you run down the hill to your washing machine because you can't take a little dirt."

Victoria's mouth fell open and her face turned beet-red. "Y-you-you monster!" She slammed her fists against the ground and kicked up her



legs. “You filthy son-of-a-bitch! How could you do this to your own girlfriend?”

He snorted. “Why don’t you ask that Luca guy you were flirting with to come help you up?”

Victoria was just building herself up for another tantrum when she noticed me standing on the sidelines. Her eyes narrowed at me, and she armed herself with a couple of clods. “What are you doing here?”

Doug twisted around and his eyes widened as they fell on me. “How’d you make it this far?”

I shrugged. “One foot in front of the other?”

Victoria glared at me. “You know that’s not what he’s asking. There’s a bunch of other people behind us that are in better shape than your sorry ass, so how’d you make it up here?” She paused and narrowed her eyes. “Did you take a shortcut? That’s against the rules.”

“I didn’t cheat, and I still don’t expect to win,” I admitted as I strolled past them.

I came a little too close to Victoria. She lunged at my leg and managed to grab hold of my ankle. I lost my balance and fell onto my side with a hard crunch. My heart skipped a beat and the familiar pain returned.

Victoria’s wild, fiery eyes glowed as they stared at me in horror mixed with rage. “I’m going to make sure you don’t win!”

“Let go!” I insisted as I tried to wiggle out of her grip. The longer she held on to me the worse my heart felt. The whole world around me seemed to pulse with a single heartbeat and I became light-headed. “Let go...”

Her face contorted with such fury that it appeared to shift into some gruesome mask of a monster. Her nose lengthened to a point, as did her ears, and her eyes became mere slits in a mess of wrinkles.

A dirt clod struck her face and the horrifying transformation vanished. She was Victoria once again, and still angry. Victoria whipped her head to Doug who now had only one clod in his possession. “What was that for?”

“Let her go, Victoria,” he demanded as he tossed the clod up and down in his hand. “If she deserves the crown then she deserves it.”

Victoria sneered at him. “Like hell I’m-” Doug threw his other clod and her unfinished sentence brought the opportunity for the dirt to land in her open mouth.

Victoria choked on God’s green earth and dropped my ankle. The pain in my heart and the throbbing in my head stopped immediately. I

scampered to my feet and stumbled backward a few feet up the hill facing the pair who faced off against each other.

Victoria failed in her efforts to get the dirt off her tongue. She slammed her fists in the dirt on either side of her and loosed a terrible, high-pitched scream. "You'll pay for that, Doug! You fucking monster!"

Doug was all smiles as he looked up at me. "Go on or you won't have a chance of winning!"

I smiled and nodded. "Thank you."

He gave me a lazy two-finger salute. "No problem."

I turned and raced up the hill with my ears full of Victoria's screeches, but they were soon deafened by the many bends and trees. Only a few more corners were between me and victory. My pulse quickened when I heard voices ahead of me.

"It's a nice view, isn't it?"

"Definitely."

A crystalline laughter rang out through the forest as I rounded the corner and stopped. The path leveled off and widened into the plateau that held the Dragon Ascending statue. A wall of impenetrable stone rose up before me, but to my right the trees cleared enough to make one final trail that led to the small clearing. The branches of the trees and bushes had been worn away by animals and people, and through their unconscious efforts they had created a tunnel of greenery with a light at the far end.

A fallen log sat in front of the stone wall, and on it sat Sarah and Bill. They were held one another's hand and were smiling at each other. Bill only had eyes for his pretty wife.

Sarah swatted Bill's shoulder. "You're supposed to be looking at the scenery, Bill."

He grinned. "When the view beside me is so good?"

Sarah noticed me and her face lit up. "Diana! You made it!"

I grinned and shrugged. "I'm just as surprised as you."

Bill leaned close to his mate and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. "Almost made it, my dear. There's still a short walk through there." He pointed at the tunnel of vines and branches. "I think it's through there."

Sarah smiled up at me. "Go on! You earned it!"

I blinked at her and pointed at myself. "You mean there's nobody else in front of you?"

She shook her head. “Not a soul, and Bill and I couldn’t move an inch further even if we wanted to.”

Bill draped his arm over her shoulder and gave her a soft smile. “I’m comfortable.”

She rolled her eyes, but they twinkled with glee. “You’re such a flatterer. But you-” She returned her attention to me. “Go on now! Go claim your crown, Queen Diana!”

I snorted but gave them a salute with two-fingers before I strolled down the path. I’d never felt so good as I did then, under the canopy of lush green and surrounded by the luxurious scents of the wilds. The tunnel stretched for almost a hundred feet before it opened to reveal the meadow of the dragon.

The narrow clearing stretched for some fifty feet and was surrounded on all sides by a thick mess of trees and brush. Not a soul could have seen this place from below or above, especially with the encroaching branches over the central focus of the area.

The Dragon Ascending statue stood regally in the center of the clearing. The said dragon sat atop a rough pillar overlooking a small fountain bowl. Its small wings were outstretched over itself like two strangely shaped umbrellas. Its neck stretched downward, allowing its long face to peer into the still waters of the bowl.

At one time the carving must have been beautiful, but time and weather had taken its toll. The wings were chipped and a long horn that once stretched backward atop its head was missing. Still, even time couldn’t diminish the beauty of its lithe figure and the majestic intricacies of its scaled body.

I walked up to the fountain and paused at the edge of the bowl. Something in the dragon’s face caught my eye. There was such a forlorn look of loss that I felt my heart twinge in a pain of kinship. Here was someone who was looking for someone to love it.

A clapping of hands made me jump. I spun around to find Luca standing in the opening to the tunnel. A smile graced his handsome features as he dropped his hands and strolled over to me.

Those beautiful eyes studied my face with pleasure mixed with a sultry desire I couldn’t miss. “Congratulations, Diana. You are the sole winner of the Dragon Run.”

I tamped down the heat that arose in my body from his desirous gaze and gave him a shaky smile. "I-I guess it was just my lucky night."

"For both of us," Luca mused as he reached into his coat and drew out the crown. He held it in the splayed fingers of his hands and raised the object above my head. "And with this crown do I dub you my bride, now and forever."

My eyes widened, but my shock didn't have time to enjoy its place on my face as he set the crown atop my head. A wind picked up and gusted past me. I was blown into Luca's waiting arms, and a dark light from behind me made me look over my shoulder.

A swirling vortex of purple light appeared beside the fountain. The portal broadened from a tiny hole into a large entrance. The purple strands of light in the center parted to reveal a scene of an ancient rotunda of stone. Statues of dragons were seated in niches in the walls, and the roof rose up beyond the view of the strange portal.

My heart skipped a beat when I felt the winds pull inward. Luca wrapped his arms around me as our feet slid along the grassy ground, drawing us closer to the portal. I clung to him out of instinct and whipped my head up. His face was as serene as an angel.

"What are you doing?" I yelled as the wind picked up, as did our sliding speed. "We have to get out of here!"

He smiled. "We'll be out of here soon."

I felt the chill of the stone room on the back of my neck and turned in time to watch myself slide through the vortex. Grass became rock and trees were now columns. I tried to throw myself out of Luca's grasp and onto the ground to grab at anything, but the portal took hold of me and sucked me in. The hard floor greeted me as I was thrown backward onto the stones.

Luca stepped through the portal and the opening closed behind him with a soft sigh. He bent down and held his hand out to me. "Welcome to my world."

That's when I fainted.

Sunlight penetrated my eyelids and stabbed my eyeballs. I groaned and threw the sheets over my head. Their silky texture rubbed luxuriously against my cheeks and made me smile.

That is, until I remembered I didn't own any silk sheets.

My eyes flew open, and I shot up in a bed that was definitely not mine. The room didn't belong to me, either. That, or someone had sneaked in during the night and changed all the furniture, wallpaper, and flooring. And increased the size by about four times. They were a heck of a carpenter.

My fanciful idea was thrown out the window when I looked out the nearest one. The view wasn't the same from my bedroom. My apartment looked out over a patch of struggling grass surrounded by a small parking lot.

I slid out of the high bed and walked over to the sill which I leaned my hands on. The view from the window revealed a massive city that stretched out nearly beyond my view. Houses big and small, churches tall and short, and businesses squat and wide mingled together in a bedlam of city planning. The countless styles of architecture hinted at centuries of building and rebuilding as each district fell into disuse or rose to prominence. The structures poured over the gentle curve of a few rolling hills, the tallest of which rose up to the foot of the building in which I found myself.

Trees dotted the streets, and a few of them were as tall as apartment buildings. One of them proved to be a spectacular specimen that rose up

for five hundred feet. Its limbs cast a deep shadow over the empty ground beneath it so that I could only make out small gray shapes, but nothing else. No buildings, no sheds, not even a doghouse.

I leaned out and looked down. A wall of windows like mine stretched for two hundred feet to the hilly rock. Another sheer cliff of some hundred feet stood between the foundation and the bottom of the street that ringed the hill. The drop wasn't sheer all the way around, though, as I glimpsed a small plateau to my right where a road wound down to the massive city below.

I slid down onto the floor with my eyes wide and my mouth agape. "I'm not in Kansas anymore..."

A hard rap on the door made me jump, and Luca's voice drifted through the heavy wood. "May I come in?"

My first thought was no. My second thought was also no. My third thought was the one in which I took action. I scrambled to my feet and raced over to a long, narrow table that stood near the pair of doors that appeared to be the only entrance to the lavish room. Tapestries hung from the walls and luxurious rugs covered the stone floor.

I pushed the far end of the table and the clawed metal feet scraped across the stones as I eased the table into place in front of the doors. The work was done in a few seconds and I slumped exhausted but proud against the top. Then the doors were opened outward into the hall. Damn it.

Luca leaned over the table and revealed his new attire. Gone was the cloak, and in its place was an elegant cape with a black underside and a scarlet exterior. He wore a buttoned white blouse with black jeans without a zipper, but a black belt held them up. His shoes were stern black boots with sharp toes, and a large ruby ring sparkled on the middle finger of his left hand.

He looked both directions before he caught sight of me. A slightly bemused look appeared to overshadow his initial worried expression. "Did you need help rearranging the furniture?"

I glared back at him. "All I need from you is a one-way ticket home."

His humor faded and he leaned his arms over the top of the table. "I'm afraid that isn't possible."

"Then make it possible."

"The effort would kill you."

I snorted. "You're going to have to prove that."

He studied me for a long while before he pushed off from the table. "I can do that, but you have to trust me enough to unblock the doorway."

"Why?"

His eyes twinkled with mischief as he nodded at a narrow door set in the far wall to his right. "Because we didn't arrive in this world through the closet."

My heart quickened a little. "Then we're really in another world? I haven't gone on a bender at Bill's bar and ate too much of his marijuana brownies, have I?"

He raised an eyebrow, though the corners of his lips twitched upward. "Not that I'm aware of, unless we're both hallucinating." He pressed his palms against the side of the table. "May I come in?"

"Into a lady's bedroom?"

"It's my bedroom."

My face drooped and I again swept my eyes over the opulence. "You... live here?"

"Sleep, actually. The living takes place in the rest of the castle."

A strange idea teased the back of my mind as I slowly turned my head back to him. "You're... that crown you had... the one for a queen-" I couldn't quite figure out how to put into words what I wanted to know.

Luca smiled and reached behind his back. He spun his belt around and I realized the front had backed his cape. A shiny gold belt buckle had the golden head of a dragon emblazoned on the front. Something also hung from a short rope attached to his belt.

It was a crown.

The one Luca unclasped from his belt was even more ornate. Tall spires of gold rose up from the band covered in gems of all styles and minerals, arranged in a perfect symmetry of beauty. He set the crown atop his head and smiled at me. "What do you think?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I think... I need to get out of here."

I tried to scoot across the table and past him, but he stepped into my path. "But there's nowhere you can go."

I looked past him and saw that the doors led out into a hall of stone covered with more tapestries and a few busts on pedestals. "Home is a good option."

Luca pursed his lips. "I'll take you to the entrance to your home, and there I can show you the proof of my words. Will that stop you from running away?"

I stopped my scaling of the table and folded my arms over my chest. "I make no guarantees, but it's a good start."

Luca smiled. "Good. Now stand back."

I blinked at him. "But-"

He pushed against the table like a child would a cardboard box. The wood furniture which I could barely push easily shifted beneath his strength. I jumped back and watched with gaping mouth as he put the table back in its place before turning to me, all without so much as a puff of exhaustion.

"Shall we?"

I shook off my shock and frowned at him. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

His eyes twinkled with tease, and a hint of disappointment. "I can explain, but you wish to leave here, don't you?"

"I have time," I quipped before I furrowed my brow. "Don't I?"

He smiled and used one hand to gesture at the foot of the bed. "All the time in the world."

"You make this sound like a fairy tale," I mused as I took a seat on the bed.

Luca sidled up to the foot and leaned an arm against the upright bed post. "Maybe it is."

I studied him from head to toe. "And you're my prince?"

He looked down at himself. "I don't look the part?"

My gaze stopped on his head adornment. "Not with that heavy crown. You look more like a king."

He grinned. "And if I happened to be a king?"

"Then how am I supposed to have my handsome prince?"

"We'll call it an improvement on the old tales. However," He folded his arms over his chest and his smile faltered a little. "You want to know where you are and why you were brought here."

I lifted an eyebrow at him. "Well, the question of who brought me has already been answered, so yeah, and start at the beginning."



Some of his good humor returned. “That’s a very long tale, some five thousand years.”

“Then pick out the parts that matter and skip ahead to my bits.”

Luca furrowed his brow as he looked ahead of himself, and his eyes took on a faraway look. “My kingdom is old. Very old, even for those of my world. The tales say we were brought out of the earth to guide all the other races.” He grinned down at me. “Our first act was to save a tiny village from a flood.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Races?”

He nodded. “Yes. There are quite a few, but humans are the most prominent. Dragons like me are nonexistent outside of my bloodline.”

My second eyebrow shot up. “You’re a dragon?”

He grinned. “You don’t believe me?”

I looked him over. “You’re missing most of the hardware.”

Luca stretched out his hand to me. “Would you like me to show you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Show me what?”

His face was softened by a smile, and I couldn’t help but be enchanted by his bright eyes. “How beautiful my world is.”

My eyes flickered between his face and hand, and a frown creased my lips. I reached up and pinched my arm. Hard. I winced.

Luca’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Am I a figment of your imagination?”

“Not yet,” I mused as I hesitantly laid my hand in his. “But I still have my doubts.”

“Then let me fly them away,” he teased as he led me over to the wide window from which I had been looking out, though he paused long enough to toss his crown onto the bed.

The sill was about a foot wide, and the bottom wasn’t too far from the floor. Luca hopped onto the sill and was able to stand up without hitting the arched top.

I planted my feet firmly on terra firma and gawked up at him. “Are you nuts? We could fall!”

He winked at me. “That’s the idea.”

I yelped as he bent down and grasped my arms. He drew me up onto the sill and I instinctively clutched onto him. A light breeze blew past us, and its scent hinted at flowers in bloom and a touch of sea air.

“Suicide is not the answer!” I snapped as I tried to free myself from his powerful grasp. “Especially when I’m involved!”

Luca wrapped his arms around me and pressed me lightly against his chest. “Trust me.” Then he leaned into the abyss and took me with him.

I couldn’t help but scream as we plunged toward the ground hundreds of feet below us. Luca slipped one arm under my butt and drew my face against the crook of his neck. The sun hung over us as though a spectator in this last bit of insanity.

That is, until it was blocked out. Two shadows covered the sun, and at the same time we were jerked upward a few feet and away from our certain doom. I lifted my eyes to the shadows and my jaw fell open.

A pair of leather wings protruded from Luca’s back. They stretched far out on both sides of us, and I could see each tiny bit of bone adjust to take in every hint of wind. We were kept aloft by that constant effort, along with a flap or two to keep our height.

I raised my wide eyes to Luca’s bemused face. “You... you... you have...”

“Wings?” he finished for me as a chuckle escaped his lips. “Yes, I have them. It’s a family trait.”

I was mesmerized by the soothing motion of the muscles and leather as they moved in time with the smallest of breezes. Mesmerized, that is, until Luca flapped hard and lifted us a little higher.

A devilish twinkle slipped into his eyes. “Care for a guided tour of my city?”

I frowned. “What do you mean-”

I interrupted myself with a scream as Luca dove down. The wind whipped past my face as the earth came up on us. The winding road down the castle entrance came closer and closer. I prepped for an earth-shattering kaboom, but it didn't come. Luca opened his wings wide, and we glided twenty feet above the ground. He turned us upward and we cleared the rooftops of the fine houses that lined the wide road. They reminded me of Georgian mansions in English countrysides, though without the massive grounds.

"That's the Procession Road," he told me as we flew past elegant lampposts and a few white benches placed at intervals along the route. "Every king since the beginning has walked down the road to the site of the coronation."

I looked at the world through peeks and glances. "Would it be too much to ask if we had this guided tour from the ground?"

"We'll attract attention," he warned me.

I looked down at the folk who traveled along the route. They were dressed in all manner of styles, from Victorian to medieval peasant. A few carriages rolled up to the side of the road, and women in large, feathered hats poked their heads out and admired my flying companion. A few even waved their ostrich fans at him.

"King Luca!" one of them cooed from the window of her elegant white carriage pulled along by two equally white horses. "When will we have that brunch you promised me?"

Luca only smiled and bowed his head to her, though I noticed he flapped faster. I leaned back and studied his face with a barely concealed grin. "So that's why you want to avoid landing."

"A rich man has many admirers."

"Well, this woman isn't going to be one of them unless you put her down."

He grinned. "If I do that, will you promise to be one?"

I snorted. "Not on your life, but you're putting that in your hands if you don't put me down."

Luca laughed. "I'm very difficult to remove from the-ouch!"

I had grabbed his earlobe and given it a nice twist. I kept a firm hold on the flap as I smiled at him. "You were saying?"

He winced. "I was saying we'll land soon."

Luca turned us off onto a narrower side street and landed behind a stack of crates outside a side door. He set me down and I stumbled a few feet before turning around. My jaw hit the puddled ground as I watched his wings disappear behind his back.

He offered me his arm and a smile. "Shall we?"

I eyed both the man and the arm with a slight touch of suspicion. "You're taking me home, right?"

His smile faltered a little, but he inclined his head. "I will take you to the portal immediately." I raised an eyebrow but accepted his arm. A grin slipped onto his lips as he drew me against his side. "And by the scenic route."

My eyebrows crashed down. "You little sneak! You didn't say anything about fine print!"

"The 'fine print' will get us to the destination, but by a-ahem," He looked over his shoulder at Procession Street that opened behind us. I followed his gaze and noticed that a crowd had gathered behind us. Many of them gawked at Luca, but others had curious eyes for me. "a quieter route."

I faced ahead and frowned. "Alright, but no funny business."

He chuckled as he led me forward toward a smaller street. "Your euphemisms are quite amusing."

I looked him up and down. "I'm surprised you know them at all, and that you speak my language."

"Your world and mine aren't too different," he mused as we stepped out into the off-street.

A horse trotted past with a strange man riding in the saddle. The man had mouse ears that stuck out of his tall hat, and a tail swished out from his pants. His four fingers were round and pudgy, and his face stretched out into a short pale snout.

I snorted as I watched the mouse man disappear down the street. "Yeah, just like home..."

“That man was a specialty swordsman with a great deal of vanity,” Luca commented.

I raised an eyebrow at my guide. “How can you tell?”

He nodded at where the mouse man had gone. “His scabbard was of the finest quality and his saddle impeccably polished.”

“And the vanity?”

Luca grinned. “His tail was waxed. Most mouse men don’t go to that much trouble to show off their ‘assets.’”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll have to remember that.”

A slight touch of eager hope crossed his face. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

I almost hated to ruin that adorable boyish charm of his. “According to you I don’t have a choice, but I’ll believe that when I see it. Speaking of seeing,” I swept my eyes over the area. The street was lined on both sides by two-floor wood frame houses. They had a touch of Bavaria about them, what with their whitewashed fronts and paned square windows. “You sure do have a lot of styles of houses around here.”

He studied the architecture with more than a hint of pride and admiration. “Amnisis is an old city, and many people have called it home.”

I tilted my head to one side. “What does ‘Amnisis’ mean?”

He smiled down at me. “It means ‘one river,’ for all the peoples of the world flow into her and become a single people.”

“And your family has been in charge for a thousand years?”

He chuckled. “Five thousand, but who’s counting?”

I looked him up and down. “You’re not that old, are you?”

Luca stared at me in surprise for a moment before he burst into laughter. I scowled at him as he recovered himself and shook his head. “No, I’m not that old. I’ve barely passed my thirtieth year.”

“So, dragon men don’t live any longer than humans?” I asked him.

“They live much longer, but I haven’t had the chance to live those years.” A slightly sad expression crossed his face as we came to an intersection. “My father passed on five years ago, and I’ve been the ruler since that time.” He swept his eyes over the strange but beautiful houses and small shops. “I have a great many responsibilities, but I cherish all of them that help my people grow in wealth and happiness.”

I leaned back a little and studied his face. There were hints of gray at the temples and a touch of eternal worry at the corners of his eyes. My heart softened a little for this handsome man who was aging before his time. “So, about this ancestor of yours. I’m guessing the people elected him to be their leader in thanks for the save?”

He smiled. “Exactly. My family has ruled over the city ever since.”

“It’s a nice place” I caught that hopeful glint in his eyes again, “to visit.”

Some of his smile disappeared as he nodded at the way ahead of us. “We’ll be there soon.”

I arched an eyebrow. “And where’s ‘there?’”

“The Cloister of Reflection.”

The name made my other eyebrow lift up. “That sounds impressive. I’m guessing it’s a place where you think about things before being crowned?”

I couldn’t help but notice his eyes flickered in my direction. “About many things, but you’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

We ventured onward and soon little Bavaria curved around and rejoined Procession Street. The crowds didn’t notice as we slipped into their number and mingled with all sorts of people and animals. Dogs and cats scooted out of the way, catching whatever fell off the many carts that rumbled up and down the road. Women with children scurried up and down the slightly raised stones that made up the sidewalks, and men in long tails strode confidently to their next point of business.

All manner of peoples in-between them walked to and fro in search of sights, sounds, and some fun. The wide-eyed tourists gaped up at the

elegant scenery. I know, I was one of them as we passed by buildings with balconies surrounded by wrought iron elegantly twisted to form strands of vines and trees. The real things dotted the streets on either side, and flowerpots hung from many windows.

That got me wondering. “There’s a lot of fresh baskets hanging around. Are you celebrating something?”

A bittersweet smile appeared on Luca’s lips. “That remains to be seen, but here-” He hurried us through the crowds and onto another side street.

This one was narrower than the last, and the houses gave way to a long line of larger-than-life statues that lined both sides. Men stood at attention in all variety of elegant war attire, from the marshal look to a few knights in shining armor. They led the way to a small domed building made of pure white marble.

A few groups of tourists took in the scenery, but they couldn’t come within twenty feet of the white structure because of a pair of guards with spears. Their armor was lightweight and scarcely covered more than their chests, wrists, and shins. I was surprised to see that they were women who stood at attention. At our coming they stretched to their full heights.

Luca gave them a slight bow of his head as we passed. Some of the tourists tried to follow us, but the women used their spears to block the path of the curious sightseers.

One of the tourists looked at the guard as they pointed a finger at me. “Is that her?”

The guard scowled back. “Any announcement will be made by the castle.”

“What announcement was that guard talking about?” I asked my guide as we walked up the steps of the portico that surrounded the entirety of the building.

Luca stared straight ahead and nodded at the pair of tall and wide wooden doors that stood before us. “The way to your home is in here.”

He released my hand and pushed against the pair of doors. They creaked open and light spilled into a small round room. Pillars held up the roof, and a wide walkway curved around the outside of the columns and came back around to the doors. The floor was made from cut stones that followed the curve of the room in a band of circles that grew smaller the closer they came in the middle of the room until they stopped at a single round rock.

The sunlight reflected off an oval mirror that sat in the middle of the room. The gold of its frame glistened brightly in the light, and Luca and I were perfectly reflected in the smooth surface of glass.

Luca strode inside and I followed him. He stopped beside the mirror where he set his hand on the gilded frame and studied the ornate flowery edge. “The Glass of Caelum has been in place for over a thousand years. The glass was plundered from a monastery of our enemy and the finest goldsmiths were enlisted to create a fitting frame. They surpassed themselves, and the mirror was set in this place forever more.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and swept my eyes over the area. There was nothing in there except we two and the mirror. “That’s nice, but how do I get home?”

Luca stepped back and used one hand to gesture to the mirror. “Through here.”

I arched an eyebrow but stepped forward and pressed my palm flat against the glass. Nothing happened. “Is there a switch to make it work?”

He nodded. “The Dragon Moon.”

“You mean the Blue Moon?” I guessed.

He shook his head. “Not quite. The Blue Moon in your world must coincide with what’s called the Dragon Moon in mine. That opens the portal and allows travel.”

Some of the color drained from my face. “And how often does the Dragon Moon happen?”

“Once every one hundred years.”

My jaw hit the marble floor. “You’re kidding.”

Luca pursed his lips. “Would that I was.” He set a hand on my quivering shoulder as the impossibility of me headed home fell on me like a ton of bricks. “I’m sorry. If there was a way, I would gladly return you home.”

I shrugged off his arm and spun around to face him with my angry eyes. “Then why did you take me? You knew I couldn’t go back, so why take me?”

Luca turned to face me, and those brilliant eyes met mine with sorrow, hope, and more than a little feral desire. “Because you are my queen.”



I wavered between shrinking away from those eyes and standing proud. I opted for a slump against the gilded mirror and turned my face away from those beautiful eyes. “What does that even mean?”

His footsteps echoed across the floor as he moved to stand behind me. He lifted his hands up on either side of me, hesitated, and dropped them back down to his sides. “It means I love you.”

My eyes widened and I spun around to face him. He swooped down and captured my lips in a passionate kiss that sealed his sincerity. His arms wrapped around me, drawing me closer into our embrace. A deliciously warm heat ran up and down my body, and I couldn’t help the tiny moan that escaped me.

Luca drew back and the desire I’d seen in his eyes earlier was now lust. My cheeks blushed bright red, and I trembled beneath such hunger. His cleared his throat, but it was still a little husky. “The mirror has granted my family the ability to cross over into your realm for millennia in order to find the one we’re destined to wed. I knew you were the one the first I saw you, and my suspicions were confirmed when you and you alone reached the statue.”

I blinked at him and some of his feral magic slipped off me. “The Dragon Hill run? That was some sort of a test for your queen?”

He smiled. “Yes, and you passed with flying colors.”

I pushed away from him and took a step back. “Wait a sec. How exactly was a leisurely stroll up a hill going to help you decide that I was your queen?”

Luca set a hand on the mirror and studied his reflection. "The hill was enchanted that one night when I was able to pass through the portal. Only those who are worthy could reach the summit. The others would be weighed down by their own faulty qualities."

I raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

He shrugged. "Greed, reluctance, fear. In the case of the last two you met, they had already found their one true mate, but their happiness brought them farther than anyone."

I crossed my arms over my chest and frowned. "So, you're saying that I wanted this to happen?"

He turned his face to me and tilted his head to one side. "Did your step falter at any point in the climb?"

I furrowed my brow as I went over the previous night's events. Finally, I shook my head. "No, I guess I didn't." I set a hand over my heart and stared at the floor as I bit my lower lip. "I... I actually felt pretty good. The best I'd felt in a long time."

Luca set his hand over mine and I looked up into his smiling face. "You never had a weak heart."

I blinked at him. "What are you talking about? I've had a weak heart since I was born."

His face was so gentle as he shook his head. "With each step you took up that mountain, what happened to your heart?"

I furrowed my brow. "It... it stopped hurting."

Luca leaned down and brushed his lips across mine. "Your heart was merely missing a piece of itself. Every step up the mountain filled in the hole, and at the top you found yourself, your whole self, waiting for you."

I wrinkled my nose and drew away from him. "That sounds insane, like some sort of fairy tale with knights and dragons."

He still smiled as he folded his arms over his chest. "Dragons, you say?"

His wings burst out of his back and curved around the room. They slipped behind me and drew me toward him. I raised my hands and caught myself against his chest. His leather wings wrapped closer about me, and their warmth reinvigorated the sensual heat inside of me.

Luca grinned down at me. "I can be both your knight and your dragon, if you'll let me."

I snorted. "So, you'll woo me and eat me, is that it?"

“If you want that.”

I pushed myself away or tried to. His wings kept me close against his warm, hard chest. “What I want is to take a deep breath, pinch myself again, and figure out what I’m going to do if I’m really stuck here.”

“Your Highness!” The shout came from outside the building. One of the spear guards raced through the open doors and skidded to a stop a few feet away from us. Her helmet almost flew off, but she adjusted the hat and pointed at the doors. “The King of the Ponds is coming!”

Luca’s eyebrows crashed down. “Have the gates been opened?”

She shook her head. “No, Your Highness! The key is missing!”

His wings drew back into his body and he dropped his arms from around me. A few whispered words floated under his breath. “Damn it.” He turned to me and forced a smile that was as genuine as a ten-dollar Rolex. “You’ll have to excuse me. Duty calls.” He strode from the building, though he paused long enough to cast a look at the guard. “Take her back to the castle.” The guard stood at attention and bowed her head.

“Wait a second!” I yelled as he hurried down the steps of the portico.

I was forced to stop in the doorway as he spread his wings out far behind him. Luca leapt into the sky and flapped hard. Winds blasted downward and whipped a bit of dust up, forcing both the guard and me to cover our eyes with our hands and arms. He sailed up into the sky and soon disappeared over the horizon of rooftops.

The woman soldier bowed her head to me. “Please follow me to the castle.”

I couldn’t help but stare at where Luca had disappeared. “What’s this about a king of the pond?”

“He is the lord of the dwarves who dwell in the Lower Halls.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What Lower Halls?”

“They are large passages under the city created by the columns that keep Amnisis from sinking under the weight of its many streets and buildings. In later times the area was converted into a cistern to supply water to the city during droughts and sieges.”

My eyes widened. “Sinking? Why would that happen?”

She used the tip of her spear to point at the ground. “The city is built upon an ancient marshland that was drained long ago, and the drainage left hundreds of hollow caverns beneath the ground. The peoples of long ago erected huge columns to hold the city up, and the dwarves protect them in

return for their semi-independence. Now,” She stretched her weapon arm out in the direction of the castle that stood proud of the metropolis, “if you will follow me.”

I reluctantly allowed her to lead me down the streets. The calm business atmosphere had changed to a slight touch of panic. The women and children had disappeared, and more than one man looked over their shoulder in the direction Luca had gone as they scurried along the street. Most of the carts, too, had vanished, and only a few sat alongside the street.

We passed by a cart with a large tarp-covered bed. The driver, attired in filthy pants with a dirty blanket over his shoulders, sat hunched over atop the box with a sorry nag ahead of him. At our passing he turned slightly in our direction, enough that I could see a bright yellow eye. He held a small pipe, and as we passed, he tapped the stick against the side of the box.

The tarp was flung aside, and three men jumped out. The driver, too, leapt to the ground and flung off his shawl. He revealed a buttoned black shirt and a dazzling smile full of gold teeth. His three accomplices were likewise attired, though lacking in the gold teeth department. They held short daggers, but long swords hung at their hips.

The leader himself drew out his longsword and grinned at us. “We’re here to relieve you of your cute little package, spear maiden.”

My protector pushed me behind her and backed us up toward the front of the nearest building. She gripped the spear tightly in both hands and glared at the four men. “You will not have her.”

The leader held his sword out in front of him and clicked his tongue. “Pity. I was hoping for an easy, and bloodless, handover, but if you insist.”

He lunged forward, as did the other three. The spear maiden’s backing up, however, meant the men couldn’t surround us and were forced to go at her swinging two at a time. She used her long spear to block their blows and shove them back. They were replaced by the other two attackers, but a few quick thrusts in the gut dropped one of them to his knees. My protector slammed her stick into the face of another before blocking a blow from the leader.

She whipped her head around and caught my eye. “Run!”

I didn't wait for a second command and darted down the street.

The leader pointed his sword at me and glared at his men. "Get her!"

The one who was unharmed by the spear maiden's attacks ran after me. I had no idea where I was going, but any place was better than in the grimy arms of the sleazy man. People and carts were my defenses, and I used them to dash around and through, slowing down my much larger pursuer. Agility was all I had against him, as his speed was much greater than mine and he slowly gained on me. Ten feet. Five. He reached out a hand to grab me.

I took a hard left into a narrow alley. The man kept going a few more feet and crashed into a water barrel. Now he was soaking wet and angry, and I heard him cry out as he resumed our merry chase. I burst out of the alley and found myself on a small street with single-floor homes. They were made of mud, but white-washed to perfection and the street was clean.

My lungs, however, weren't in so great a condition. They screamed at me for a break, but the screaming man behind me pumped more adrenaline through my body. I stumbled down the slight decline and dashed into another side street close by before the man reached the end of the alley.

I darted behind a pile of boxes and held my breath as I heard the growling man approach the mouth of my hiding spot. My whole body shook, and I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the little whimperings

that wanted to come out. The man's shadow stretched into the alley and nearly touched me. He took a step inside and swept the area with his eyes.

The man lifted his foot for another step, but a shout in a distance made him pause. He turned around and stilled for a moment, listening. The voices came closer. He turned tail and hurried away. I collapsed against the mud wall to my right and breathed a sigh of relief.

"What a marvelous outfit!"

My head shot up as a large shadow descended on me. Soft down-covered hands pawed at me. I yelped and pushed them away.

My attacker stumbled back, and I finally had my first view. It was a woman, or at least most of a woman. She was about my height with snowy white hair hidden underneath a broad-brimmed hat. The woman wore a puffy dress that more resembled a patched hot-air balloon than clothing. The material was like silk and glistened in the sun, and small jewels speckled the costume here and there so as to create an otherworldly look to the ensemble.

Most amazingly, she had tufts of white feathers growing out of her cheeks. They pointed backwards toward her ears and created a beautiful tattoo-like accentuation of her face. Feathers also extended out of her puff sleeves and covered the tops of her palms to the first knuckle of her fingers. Her face was narrow, pointed, and high-ridged which accentuated her bird-like appearance.

She rubbed her hand and frowned at me. "That was quite rude! And here I was only admiring your wonderful attire!"

"Could've fooled me," I grumbled as I used the wall to climb to my feet.

The bird woman wrinkled her beaked nose. "I meant to fool no one. I was merely curious about your clothes." She used one hand to gesture at my shirt. "Now, may I?"

I blinked at her. "May you what?"

She lifted her eyes to the sky and sighed. "My goodness. You act as though you've never met an avius."

I shrugged. "I haven't gotten around much."

She pointed at my shirt. "Well, may I touch your shirt?"

I looked down at myself and shrugged. "Um, go for it."

The strange woman grasped the front of my shirt and rubbed the cloth between her fingers. "What interesting material. Do you have a copyright

on this style?”

“Um-” I looked left where the castle loomed in the distance, and a bright idea popped up in my mind. “Yeah, I have a copyright, and a patent. And I made sure to hide the designs in my extra-secret spot.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “That’s rather extreme, even for we avius. Is there any chance you’d be willing to sell your design to me?”

I pointed at the far-flung citadel. “I’ll give it to you if you’ll take me to the castle.”

The bird woman lifted her beaked nose and wrinkled it. “There? I never approach that place.”

My heart fell. “Why not?”

“Because, my dear, it’s too gaudy!”

I looked the woman up and down but shook off any blunt comments I wanted to make. “Then can you take me to the door that leads to the hall of the Pond King?”

She arched an elegant eyebrow. “Why would you want to go there?”

“I... I have a friend there who I need to see,” I told her.

She shrugged. “Very well, but I expect that copyright in writing once you’ve found your friend.”

I nodded. “I swear it.”

The bird smiled and swept into a low curtsy. “Then Pennae at your service. And you are?”

“Diana,” I replied as I looked over my shoulder at where my pursuer had gone. “But could we talk on the way?”

“Certainly. It’s this way.”

Pennae led me out the opposite side of the alley and down another residential street, though I noticed a few businesses speckled the area and gave a little more character to the neighborhood.

“It’s funny I should run into you,” Pennae mused as she guided me along. She swept an arm out in front of us. “I was just looking for inspiration for my next clothing line and who should come along but you and your fine material.”

I couldn’t help but look over her strange puffy dress. “So, is that what you do for a living?”

Pennae threw her head back and laughed. “You really don’t get around a lot, do you? We avius live for nothing but the hunt of a solid cut or the fame of finding the season’s latest style.” She cupped her chin in her

feathered hand and I noticed her nails were slightly yellowed and sharpened to talon-like points. Her bright yellow eyes studied me again with hope. “You may yet lead me to something spectacular. Attire suited to both men and women, but with a touch of elegance for both.”

I suppressed a snort as I looked down at my worn jeans and t-shirt. “I’m glad it’s useful, but how far is it to this gate?”

“You’re wanting me to take you to the main gate, right?” I nodded in the hope that Luca would have gone there to find out about the ‘key’ problem. “Then it’s only two miles down these roads and a hard left toward the foot of the mountains.”

I looked her over. “And you can’t fly me there?”

The avius laughed. “Of course not! How undignified would it be to shed my clothes and fly a human over the city?” She closed her eyes and shuddered. “I would never live down the disgrace!”

I blinked at her. “Then you can’t fly?”

She tapped the side of her long nose. “We don’t fly in public, my dear. It’s impossible to fly with clothes on, and to strip naked in front of everyone-” She set the back of her hand against her forehead and swooned a little. “The horror!”

I grimaced and held up my hands. “I get the picture. Maybe a little too well...”

Pennae stretched her long neck out so her sharp eyes studied me more closely. “You are a rather strange human. I have never met one so ignorant of the city and its people. Are you perhaps a visitor from a far-off land?”

I snorted. “Very far-off, but I’m sure you guys get tourists all the time.

She nodded. “Oh yes. Amnisis is a jewel among so many plain rocks.” She swept her arm over our surroundings and smiled. “It’s a great center of learning, of culture, and, last but not least, of fashion. I came here as a young chick to study its long history of ‘setting the trend,’ as they say in my business. And its libraries full of all those illustrations!” She nearly swooned again. “Marvelous! Magnificent!”

I raised an eyebrow. “So, you’re not from here?”

Pennaie shook her head. “Oh no. A scholarship brought me from the high nests of my people down to the low pecking ground of the dragon city.”

Both of my eyebrows shot up. “Dragon because of its leader?”



“Of course, my dear! Where else can you find a house ruled by those fantastical creatures?”

I shrugged. “Maybe in fairy tales.”

She laughed. “Quite right, my dear, quite right! And speaking of tales,”  
We rounded a corner and found ourselves at the back of a large crowd. She wrinkled her nose. “It appears our way is blocked to our own ending.”

The throngs of people gathered close about a pair of metal doors that were each twenty feet high and ten feet wide. Intricate carvings of columns and flowing water were so real that the sun reflected off the shimmering liquid and reflected the curious faces of the front row. They were blocked from reaching the doors by a contingency of armored guards with a few smatterings of the agile ones that had guarded the Cloister.

A short man was hunched over the foot-tall lock that kept the pair of doors closed. He wore a brown leather apron over his front, a bland green shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and the bottoms of his pants disappeared in black boots. An equally black bag sat beside him on the ground.

Pennae wrinkled her nose. "The officials must be desperate."

I looked around. "Why do you say that?"

She pointed a feathered hand at the short man. "They've brought the best locksmith in the city to try to open the-" The earth shook and nearly knocked everyone off their feet.

We swayed for a moment before we caught ourselves. I whipped my head up to my companion. "What was that?"

She pursed her lips. "That was the Pond King. It seems he's impatient to meet the new lady of the city."

A slight blush accented my cheeks. "N-new lady?"

Pennae nodded. "Yes. The king has brought a bride through the mirror, and everyone in the city is eager to meet her, the Pond King most of all."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why him?"

"He has the duty of presenting her with-"

I didn't hear the rest as movement in the crowd caught my attention. A man was moving against the flow of traffic and toward us. His unshaven face had an annoyed sneer on it as he reached into his coat. The hilt of a knife handle peeked out.

I grabbed the shoulders of my friend, spun her around, and pushed her away from the crowd. "I think we need to go."

She looked over her shoulder and frowned at me. "But you haven't found your friend yet!"

"No, but somebody found us," I returned as I glanced back at the crowd.

The man reached the edges of the throngs and broke into a sprint. I grabbed my friend's hand and yanked her down the nearest street.

"Not there!" Pennae yelled.

I learned too late why she protested. It was a dead end. The street ended only forty feet further down. I spun around to make a hasty retreat, but our way was already blocked. The man loomed in the entrance, and slowly he unsheathed a long dagger from inside his coat. The blade glistened in the shadowed light as he took a step toward us.

He leered at me with bloodshot eyes. "It's been a lot of trouble getting you, but get you we will."

Pennae shrank back from the weapon. I opened my arms and stepped forward. "Alright, take me."

He nodded at Pennae. "She comes, too." The bird woman made a tiny squawk and hid behind me.

I frowned. "She doesn't have anything to do with this."

He grinned and sliced the blade across the air in front of his throat. "Nobody tells any tales. Not until we want 'em told."

I shook my head. "Then just take me. She won't say a word."

A barking laugh escaped his lips as he marched toward us. "I'll make sure she doesn't."

My mind frantically searched for a way out of this. I would never have expected the answer would come from the skies.

A shadow dropped down behind the man. He felt the wind on his back and spun around, swinging his dagger in the spin. A clawed hand caught his wrist and jerked it. The horrible crack of broken bones echoed up and down the alley, followed by the man's warbling cry. He dropped to his knees, or tried to, but the figure's other hand shot out and wrapped around

our attacker's throat. He was lifted a foot off the ground and tossed into the wall to my left. The man crumpled to the ground and twitched a few times before he lay still.

With the knife wielder out of the way I could see our rescuer. Relief washed over me as I recognized Luca, or most of him. His wings were spread out behind himself, but scales covered his cheeks back to his pointed ears. His hands ended in talons and more scales peeked out from the top of his shirt.

Luca's bright green eyes glowed in the soft light, but they softened when they fell on me. I rushed forward and leapt into his chest, scales and all. He wrapped his arms around me, and a few whispered words passed to me. "Are you alright?"

A blubbing snort escaped my lips as I buried my face into his shirt. "What do you think?"

He drew me closer. "I'm sorry. I should never have left you."

I drew far enough away to look up at him and smile. "Why? Does this damsel kidnapping happen a lot?"

"Apparently more than I knew," he mused before his attention fell on my feathered friend. "Who do we have here?"

Pennae's eyes bulged out of her head, and she dropped to one knee before bowing her head. "Your Highness!"

I smiled at my quivering companion. "Pennae helped me to the gate."

Luca led me over to Pennae and stretched out his hand to her. She lifted her head and gaped at the offer. "Any friend of Diana's deserves to stand in my presence."

Pennae whipped her head from me to Luca and back. "Then the new queen... the lady... is?"

I shrugged. "I guess that's me."

Pennae winced. "Then you have my sincerest apologies for my demand, my queen. I never meant to cause offense--"

I held up a hand. "It was an honest deal, and you helped me find my friend, so you can have the copyright."

Tears welled up in Pennae's eyes as she set her shivering hand in his and he helped her to her feet. She still couldn't meet his green gaze, and her hands fidgeted in front of her. "I-it was my pleasure, Your Highness."

Luca looked down at me. "I was informed by my guards that you had been attacked and escaped into the city."

I nodded. “Yeah. I managed to hide, and that’s where Pennae found me. She got me here and that’s when one of the creeps found me again. Who are they?”

Luca pursed his lips. “A highly trained gang of kidnappers and assassins. They’re found more often on the seas, but the competition has forced some of them to find land legs.”

Pennae whipped her head up and her eyes widened. “You don’t mean the Trulio gang, do you?”

He nodded. “No doubt, and somebody with a large purse seems to have employed them. Many of his men have been spotted around the city, though this fellow” He scowled at the unconscious man, “is our first captive.”

I looped an arm around one of his. “In that case, I hope you don’t mind if I stick close to you.”

Luca grinned. “It would be my pleasure.”

Pennae returned to fidgeting with her feathered fingers. “If you’re done with me, Your Highness, I think I’ll be going.” She cast a quick look at our incapacitated foe. “I don’t really want to know more about them than I already do...”

Luca inclined his head. “Of course. Do as you wish.”

Pennae scooted around us, but I caught her arm and smiled at her. “Visit me some time at the castle.” I gave her a wink. “I’ll make sure to change the decor up a little.”

Her face brightened and she nodded. “Definitely!” She gave my hand a squeeze before she turned away.

I stretched out my hand. “Wait a sec!” She paused and half-turned to me. “You know where to get a hold of me, but where do I get a hold of you?”

“How silly of me!” Pennae scolded herself as she drew one sleeve back to reveal the feathers that covered the top of her hand. The shaft disappeared into her skin just above her wrist. She grasped one of the feathers and, with a bit of teeth clenching, wrenched one out which she held out to me. “You can find me with this.”

I took the feather but blinked at her. “What do I do with this?”

Pennae smiled. “You tap the point of the shaft on your wrist here-” She used a finger to tap where she’d removed the feather from her own arm. “Two taps will tell me you need me.”

“And one?”

Pennae wrinkled her nose. “That will tell me you need me urgently, but I’m sure that won’t happen.”

I clutched the feather against my chest and grinned at her. “Thanks.” Pennae nodded and disappeared into the crowds that still congregated outside the gates.

As I studied the beautiful plume Luca spoke up. “That is no small honor to be given a feather.”

I looked up at him and blinked. “Really?”

He nodded at my treasure. “Those feathers don’t grow back, so avians are very careful to whom they give them.”

I gently tucked it into my pocket and slyly smiled at him. “I’ll make sure not to ruffle her feathers. Now then-” I looked askance at my hero and raised an eyebrow. “A dwarf who’s climbing out of his columned home, bird people, and now land pirates?”

He chuckled. “My city boasts quite an eclectic mix, does it not?”

I kicked the bottom of the pirate’s shoe. “Some I could do without.”

Luca removed the man’s bandanna and pursed his lips as he studied the man. “Yes. We’ll take him with us and return to the castle.”

Luca bent down to heft the man over his shoulder when a strange spark erupted from underneath the pirate’s clothes.

“Wait!” I shouted as I grabbed one of Luca’s arms and yanked him back.

I was too eager and the force of my yanking made us fall backward onto the ground. We watched in horror as the spark turned into an immense blaze that lit up the man’s body. Luca threw himself over my body and pinned me beneath him as the heat blasted outward. Even with his protection I could feel the stinging fever of the extreme temperature.

The explosion lasted only a few moments, and soon Luca lifted himself off me. I got a full view of the pirate, or what was left of him. All that remained was a scorch mark.

Luca scowled at the black mark on the ground as he tucked the bandanna into his pocket. The heat had been so intense that the grains of dirt had turned to glass. “Magic protection.”

A snort escaped my lips, and I stabbed a finger at the blackened earth. “You call that protection?”

Luca stood and helped me to my feet. “It wasn’t meant to protect the bearer, but the one who placed the spell.”

My legs proved to be a little shaky and I found myself leaning against him. He wasn’t complaining, and neither was I. “And they placed the spell to keep his mouth shut?”

His face was grim as he nodded. “Undoubtedly.”

I took one last look at the blackened earth before I turned my face away. “I think I’ve had enough fun in your world for one day-” A slight tremor ran through the earth beneath us. I whipped my head up to him and stared with wide eyes. “What was that?”

His attention lay on the mouth of the alley. “The King of the Ponds wants to be released. He’s threatened to tear down the doors if he’s not let out within the day, and that was a reminder that he could do it.”

I wrinkled my nose. “What’s so bad about that? Can’t you just get a new pair of doors?”

Luca shook his head. “No. Those were imbued with magic that keeps all mold and trespassers from entering the Ponds and wreaking havoc on the entire water supply of the city.”

I winced. “Then you can’t just walk into the nearest home store and buy a pair, but have you figured out where the key is?”

Luca dropped his attention back to the black spot on the ground. “No, but I wouldn’t doubt it was a distraction to lure me away from you. Fortunately, that may be to our advantage.”

I blinked at him. “How?”

“If true, it means the pirates merely wanted to separate us. They would not have hidden the key to cause lasting harm.”

“‘If true,’” I repeated.

He sighed and nodded. “Quite right, but we’ll work from there and see if we can’t find the key. It was taken only an hour ago from its spot in the Museum of Antiquity.”

I tilted my head to one side as he led me out of the alley. “I get that the key is important enough it needs to be kept under lock and key, but why is it kept in a museum and not some private vault?”

He grinned. “It’s of a rather... unusual shape, and many people desire to see it, so there it sits until the Pond King wishes to emerge from his domain.”

We side-stepped the crowd and Luca guided me down the street away from the doors. “And that happens how often?”

“Once a year, normally after the season of rains to give his assessment of the water levels.”

I snorted. “Naturally. Speaking of him visiting,” I cast a side-glance at the strange dragon king, “was he really wanting to see me or some other damsel?”

Luca smiled down at me. “You. He knew I had ventured through the mirror looking for a bride, and when word reached him that I had brought one back he was naturally curious.”

I blushed and dropped my eyes to the ground. “It’s all so silly. I’m not that important.”

Luca stopped and set his hands on my shoulders. He turned me so we faced each other, and he cupped my chin in his fingers to lift my eyes to meet his. “As my queen, you are the most important person in my life. Never doubt that to me you are special beyond compare.”

My face must have resembled a lit Christmas tree. “I bet you say that to all the girls you kidnap.”



A sly grin slipped onto his lips. "You're my first effort, and I don't see myself needing to try again."

I set my hand atop his and freed my chin before I cleared my throat. "Yes, well, being your special someone, doesn't mean I'm not going to stop interrogating you about this place you've dropped me into."

He offered me his arm and a chuckle. "I wouldn't have it any other way, but we should talk and walk to the museum."

I accepted his arm and we continued on our way through the myriad of alleys. "Speaking of talking, how does word reach a dwarf who lives down in the sewers?"

Luca tapped his lips with the back of one finger and winked at me. "Not that word, at least not in their presence. The dwarves are very proud of the care they take with the cistern, and any mention of the unmentionables is liable to start a war, or at least a small riot."

I raised one hand and took on a solemn look. "I solemnly swear to avoid using the 's' word, but you still haven't answered my question."

The road on which we walked and talked had an air of old Greece about it. There were stone houses on either side of us, and many of them had small porches built from sticks lashed together with thick, rough rope. The roads had transformed from cobblestone to wide, flat white stones, though all the streets sported the same narrow, parallel grooves, courtesy of countless wagon wheels.

The street on which we walked widened into a circular square. A fountain stood in the center with a pile of stones as the centerpiece of the design. The majestic form of a mermaid sat atop those stones with her head held high and her arms outstretched. Her hands were cupped together, and a small fountain of water poured from them and into the bowl beneath her.

A gaggle of women young and old hunched over the bowl. Baskets of dirty laundry were their constant companions and gossip their trade as they chatted away with each other.

One of the older women leaned closer to her fellow cloth cleaner and lowered her voice to a whisper a deaf man could hear. "And have you heard about Marcia?" The group about her quieted, eager to hear news about their acquaintance.

Her friend shook her head. "No, what?"

“The other day she was caught in her back garden wearing only her bloomers.”

A few chuckles rustled through the crowd, and a few sighed and shook their heads. One outright laughed. “She probably just locked herself out again.”

The informant shook her head. “But that isn’t the strangest part. She was caught by the milkman who was stealing out of her neighbor’s house with a pocketful of their best silver.”

“You mean their only silver,” one of their companions spoke up, and laughter burst out of the listeners.

Luca stopped us a few feet away from the women and used one hand to gesture at them and the statue. “The washing fountains are the veins of city news streams. The water not only comes up, but the news travels down the many delivery pipes. The Pond King’s domain is at the epicenter of the gossip of my entire realm.”

I snorted. “So, he’s the best source for who’s cheating on who?”

Luca smiled. “That isn’t quite his area of expertise, but he does know quite a bit about the rumors that spread by mouth, and more than once he’s helped me stop some unsavory characters from committing evils within my kingdom-”

“Your Highness!”

The shout came from one of the gossiping gals, and at mention of the handsome leader most of them squealed and dropped their laundry into the fountain. They scurried up to him and crowded me out as they smiled and batted their eyelashes for their wealthy leader.

“You’re looking healthy, Your Highness!”

“It’s always a pleasure to see you, Your Highness!”

One of the more beautiful women slid up to his side and brushed her finger down the front of his shirt. “You haven’t visited us in so long, Your Highness. Don’t you like us anymore?”

Luca smiled. “I have a city to maintain.”

She set her cheek against his shoulder and looked up at him with her doe eyes. “But we’re your citizens, too.”

He held up his hands. “Ladies, I regret to inform you that I am no longer eligible.”

Another beauty cozied up closer to him and grinned. “No ring, no problem, Your Highness.”

A large older woman with ample hips used them to bump the beautiful vixens back into the crowd and gave her sensual cohorts a scowl. “That’s enough of that now. We all know he’s got someone now, so no more gallivanting about with him, you hear?” The two women weren’t the only ones with a disappointed look, but the older woman merely turned her attention to Luca and smiled up at him. “Well? Where’s the blushing bride?”

Luca smiled. “Always so forthright, Maira.”

She laughed. “I outta be, now stop stalling and start showing.”

Luca looked over the heads of the shorter women and his eyes settled on me. He stretched out his hand to me. “Diana.”

I held back, unsure whether the ring of women would let me in to the inner circle. Maira clapped her hands over her head. “Come on now, ladies, we all want to get a good look at her, so let her through.”

They parted and I was able to accept Luca’s hand. He drew me against his side as the dozen curious eyes of the washer women looked me over. I felt like a fish at the market, and some of the younger women looked like they wanted to chop me up.

Maira looked me over with a smile and a nod. “Yes, you’ll do just right for him. Now what about your bite?”

I blinked at her. “My bite?”

She folded her arms over her chest and cast a sly smile up at Luca. “It takes more than just a winning smile to corral this hatchling. He needs a stiff hand and a good swat on the ass every few days.”

Luca winced and rubbed his butt. “I distinctly remember you giving me them more often than that.”

Maira narrowed her eyes. “And you deserved every one of them, I’m sure. Now then,” She grasped my hands and her eyes twinkled, “you be sure not to let this rapsallion get too carried away with his work. He tends to swing from one devilment to another, and sometimes needs a vacation every now and again.”

I grinned. "I'll do my best."

Luca looped one arm around my waist and drew me closer to his side. "If you're done advising her about all my flaws, I have some kingly duties to perform."

Maira nodded. "Aye, the key, isn't it? You'd best get on your way, and don't spare the wings." She swept her eyes over the crowd. "Alright, ladies, let them go and back to work with ye! Those clothes aren't going to wash themselves!"

The women reluctantly returned to work, and we moved on down the street. I looked up at Luca who still had a bemused expression on his lips. "I'm guessing Maira's known you for a long time."

He chuckled. "She was my nurse."

I snorted. "That explains the spankings."

Luca winced and rubbed his butt again. "She was certainly most familiar with my extremities than any other part of me."

I grinned up at him. "Because you were such an angel?"

He sheepishly smiled at me. "I had my moments of relapses into a rather devilish spirit."

"I'm not being led astray by a demon with wings, am I?" I teased as I swept my eyes over the stone houses.

Some of his humor slipped from his face as he looked ahead of us. "That depends on what we find at the museum. We're nearly there."

We rounded a sharp corner and found ourselves facing a long, wide thoroughfare with shops on either side. Awnings stuck out in the street so far that only a single wagon could travel between them, and the crowds sauntered here and there inspecting the wares stacked on the tables and shelves of the open-front shops. I glimpsed everything from little figurines of animals to life-size statues of people, with trinkets of pitchers, cups, and steles with tiny inscriptions and carved pictures.

The end of the route was a dead-end at a large square, and on the far side of the plaza stood the museum. It was fashioned like the ancient temples of yore. The bulk of the building was as massive as a warehouse, and tall columns at the front towered over the square and held up a stone portico. Embossed, reclining figures projected from the marble, and around them were much of the variety of knickknacks which surrounded us. A pair of large wooden doors were thrown open and a steady stream of visitors moved in and out. The long, short steps that led up to the museum

were covered with artists and loungers, all of whom enjoyed the sights set before them.

The museum had several long, deep wings on either side that stretched out past the boundaries of the square. Their fresher stones and slightly different column styles showed they'd been added at later dates, but the white marble matched the original in all but age. Long, narrow flower beds decorated the covered path that followed the length of the buildings, and people strolled down the way admiring the countless colors and varieties of flowers.

"This is quite the setup," I mused as we dove into the crowd.

Luca stayed close to me and slipped his hand into mine. "The shopkeepers copy the items in the museum and sell their miniature versions to eager tourists."

We passed a table with an arrangement of keys. "Any chance we can find a duplicate for the gate key?"

He smiled. "Only if they're imbued with an ancient magic uniquely synced to the door's lock."

"So that's a no?"

"We'll be better off finding the original," he warned me as we wound our way through the shoppers.

"Well, well!" a man shouted above the steady hum of voices. One of the shopkeepers to our left strolled out of his small square space and tucked his thumbs into the band about his ample waist. His eyes were hidden by dark, round glasses, and he had a wide grin on his face. "Look what the cat dragged down our alley."

Luca smiled and inclined his head but didn't slow down. "It would be a pleasure to stop and chat, but we have somewhere to be."

The man chuckled as we passed by. "Nothing focuses the mind like losing something as important as the gate key, eh?"

Luca pursed his lips as we moved along, and the strange shopkeeper was lost in the crowds. "I must commend the ladies on spreading the word so quickly."

I pursed my lips as we approached the towering museum. "Nothing travels as fast as bad news."

He lifted his eyes to the steps of the portico. "Let's see if we can't find some good news."

We meandered our way through the artists, but one of them shot out his hand and grabbed my ankle. The man was about twenty with a day's stubble on his chin, and his short dark hair was speckled with paint. He wore a splattered shirt and plain pants with worn shoes. "A moment, my muse!"

"Maybe another time, my artist," I replied as I tried to wiggle out of his grasp, but he held tight.

He looked up at me with a pleading look on his face. "But you are the one I've been looking for all this time! In fact, all day!"

I shook my head. "I'm flattered, but I only do musings on odd days."

He still held tight to me. "Please! Only a few minutes of your time!"

Luca leaned down and grabbed the man's wrist. The artist's face twisted in pain as Luca's fingers bit down into his flesh. "Release the lady."

The artist was forced to open his hand and I was freed. Luca did the same to the man who sat sullen in his spot with his empty canvas in his lap. A sketchbook sat by his side, and the askew front cover allowed me to see several dozen fresh sketches. Many had been crossed out in a frenzy.

I felt a tinge of pity for the frustrated man, but there was little time to comfort him as Luca led me up the stairs and through the doors. The interior of the museum was much like a library, with three floors in total and a reception desk to our left. Glass display cases dotted the floors and pristine metal banisters wrapped around the winding stairs that took visitors to the highest reaches of the peaked building. There were several rooms off to either side, and I glimpsed a myriad of oddities, from strange costumes to every weapon imaginable.

One of the women behind the reception desk looked up at our coming and her eyes widened. She was about forty with spectacles atop her pert nose and a tension at the corners of her lips. Her brown hair was tied back in a bun so tight I winced at the sight of it, and she wore a dress that matched the air-breathing rigidity of her hair.

She stood and bowed her head to Luca. "Your-"

He held up his hand and shook his head. "No time for formalities, Miss Smith."

She pursed her lips but nodded. "Of course, sir. This way."

Miss Smith walked around the far side of the desk and we followed. She guided us beneath a large arch and into the western wing of the museum. The wing had a long corridor down the left side with display halls on the right. She led us into the one nearest the main hall where display cases were filled with locks, keys, and lock boxes of all sizes with the treasures discovered inside of them.

There was also a room within the room, and a large wall with a pair of arched wood doors led inside. On either side of the portal were a pair of wood columns carved with symbols I didn't recognize. The doors were opened and revealed a single large pedestal atop which sat an empty glass case.

Luca paused in front of the doors and set his hand on the wood column. He looked them up and down and frowned. "Where are the guards?"

Miss Smith stopped and turned to face us. "I doubt you need to guess, but they were ambushed between tours. Fortunately, the pair only came away with some nasty headaches and a great deal of lost pride."

Luca strode over to the empty case, and I followed. The glass had been partially lifted and the key removed from its soft pillow. The shape the key had made in the pillow reminded me of a potato chip gone horrible wrong.

Luca looked up at Smith as she joined us on the other side of the pedestal. "They breached the magic barriers?"

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes, and in record time. Whoever had planned this had done their homework."



Luca set his hands on the pillow and frowned. “Did anyone happen to get a good look at the thieves?”

Miss Smith sighed. “Unfortunately, not a good one. They approached the guards wearing fake faces, as one of the guards did manage to slightly dislodge the mask, though not enough to see their true features.”

Luca scowled at the empty pillow. “Then we have no leads.”

“Not quite, Your Highness,” Miss Smith countered as she reached into her pocket and drew out a slip of folded paper. “One of the thieves dropped this in their attack, and the guard managed to hide it in his hand before he lost consciousness.”

Luca took the paper and unfolded it. I looked over his shoulder and frowned as I read the contents. “‘The east sun rises, the west sun sets. Look to the clearing.’” I wrinkled my nose and looked up at Luca. “Does the sun work that way?”

Luca shook his head. “No.”

Miss Smith sighed. “I wish I could be of help, but the note has all of us stumped. The paper is no help, either, as it’s of a plain stock sold throughout the city.”

“I will keep it just the same,” Luca told her as he tucked the paper into his pocket. “Is there anything else that could help us?”

She shook her head. “Nothing at all except we know the time of the attack to have been an hour ago, and that the men left the museum immediately after the theft.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How do you know that?”

“A tour came through and discovered the guards soon after the attack, and the guide saw two men leave the room, though they didn’t get a good look at them. The guide rang the alarm, and the museum was searched, but they were not to be found.”

Luca sighed. “We’ll search the area, anyway, but thank you for your help.”

Miss Smith smiled at him. “Has Your Highness forgotten that you have advisers and guards for such a job?”

He grinned. “You know me better than that, Eunomia.”

She laughed. “Yes, I do, but I do wish you would be more careful. You are the Light of the City, after all.”

He took my hand and inclined his head to our guide. “The Light never forgets, but now I’ll see if I can’t use that to illuminate this problem. If

you'll excuse us."

Luca turned and led me out of the room. I lifted an eyebrow at him. "Light of the City?"

He chuckled. "An archaic title for the head of my family. Those of the lesser branches aren't allowed to hold the title."

Both of my eyebrows shot up. "You mean it's not just you?"

He shook his head. "No. That is, I'm the last of my line, but there have been other siblings of my ancestors. They make up the lesser branches."

"So, is this family tree bushy or more like a scraggly stick?"

"That depends on the part of the plant you're pointing at," Luca mused as we strolled through the main hall of the museum to the front doors.

The steps were less crowded, and the artist who had grabbed my attention was gone. The warm sun lightened some of my mood, but my heart was still heavy with the mystery of the missing key.

I looked up at Luca's grim face. "Maybe the locksmith will be able to work the gate open?"

He shook his head. "That isn't certain." He balled his hands into fists at his side and he clenched his teeth. "Damn it. How could I be this careless?"

A tour group passed us, and we moved to one side of the portico to allow them room. I set my hand gently on his arm. "What will happen if he isn't let out?"

"Then His Bejeweled Radiance gets to kick your butt."

The voice came from my right and down the steps that led to the cobbled ground. I looked around, but there was no one to be seen.

"Look a little lower."

I did as the voice bade and noticed a small round sewer drain. The cover was lifted and a small man with a long, bulbous nose stared back at me with a grin of yellowed teeth. He had a dumpy hat atop his head and wore a bright red shirt of equally dumpy stature.

Luca pursed his lips. "Oppasser. It's been a long time."

The little man scurried out of the manhole with as much agility as a young goat. He wore a pair of leggy pants, but the tough black boots on his feet showed business. The man stood about three feet tall and sported black hair with graying sideburns.

The grim dwarf nodded. "Not since your father's funeral, but that's not why I'm here. His Radiance isn't happy, and he'll deal with the problem

himself if he has to.”

“He means to be released regardless of the consequences?”

He sauntered up to us and pulled an envelope out of his black belt. “A message, Your Highness, from His Radiance.”

Luca took the envelope and drew out a short letter. The hand was cursive, but otherwise was in my language. I scanned the contents.

TO HIS HIGHNESS,

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED via my tunnels that the key to the gate has been stolen. This lapse in security for something so precious is unconscionable, and should the matter not be dealt with by the time the sun sets in the sky then I will insist on creating a new gate, no matter the cost.

YOURS SINCERELY, His Radiance, King Glimlach Plas XXVI

I LOOKED UP AT LUCA. His face had taken on a bit of unhealthy pallor, but he stiffened his jaw and looked down at the little fellow. “Rest assured the key will be found in that time.”

Oppasser lifted an eyebrow. “Then you have a lead?”

“We have a few suspicions.”

Oppasser wrinkled his nose which caused the extra-long schnoz to flap to and fro. “I’ve heard those words from you before, Luca. That means you don’t have a clue where to go.”

Luca offered him a smile, but I didn’t see any warmth in it. “I’ll think of something. I always do.”

Oppasser frowned and partially turned back to the manhole but kept his sharp eyes on us. “You do, but this has a time limit, and His Radiance won’t forget you losing the key, either.”

Luca bowed his head. “Thank you for the warning.”

Oppasser nodded and scuttled back into his hole. In a moment he was gone, as was Luca's smile. That had dropped off his face, and in its place was a look of concern.

I grasped his sleeve. "What will happen if the king can't get out?"

Luca ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "He'll make a way out."

"Is that so bad?" I wondered as I looked down at the manhole. It was some two feet round. "I mean, he's just a small dwarf. How much damage could that cause?"

Luca dropped his hand to his side and smiled at me. "Unfortunately, the ruler of the dwarves is quite a bit larger than his subjects."

I raised an eyebrow. "How much bigger?"

"About ten feet tall."

My jaw hit the ground and I blinked at him. "How did that happen?"

He folded his arms over his chest and chuckled. "Legends state that one of his ancestors mated with a giantess, and the result was their line."

I snorted. "You sure to have a strange world here."

His humor fled again as he looked at me with a soft, sorrowful expression. "I'm sorry your stay here has had such a beginning. I never meant for you to get involved in such trouble."

I looped one of my arms through his and gave him a wink. "You mean it isn't always this fun?"

The corners of his lips twitched upward. "Not quite. There are some days when it's downright--"

"Your Highness!"

The squeal came from a gaggle of older women who followed the lead of a young scrawny man. At the sight of the royalty, however, they abandoned their guide and rushed over. We found ourselves surrounded and gawked at by the admiring eyes.

One of the women offered me a gentle smile. “You must be the pretty Mother we’ve heard so much about. We’re looking forward to the Consummation in a few days.”

“It’s why we traveled fifty miles to get here!” another chimed in.

I cast a side look at Luca and lifted an eyebrow. “Consummation?”

Luca cleared his throat and lifted his arms above his head. “Ladies, I welcome you to my city and hope you enjoy your stay. For now, I will leave you in the care of this young gentleman,” He used a hand to gesture at the guide, “and hope to see you again.”

I frowned at the dragon man. “What’s this about-hey!”

Luca swept me into his arms and wiggled his way through the crowd. He rushed us down the steps as the women crowded about the columns. Luca opened his wings and flapped hard. Everyone in the square stopped to gawk at us as we took off, creating a soft cloud of dust beneath us. We were airborne in a minute and flying over the patchwork city.

I glared up at Luca who faced ahead. “What’s this about a consummation?”

He didn’t meet my accusing look. “Merely a formality.”

“Uh-huh. One that involves sheets?”

“Only the kind worn about the shoulders.”

“And after that?”

The corners of his lips twitched upward. “Then no sheets are required.”

My eyebrows crashed down so low they almost fell off my face. “Listen, bub, there wasn’t anything in that hill-climbing contract about hanky-panky.”

His eyes dropped to me, and I froze. There was a distinct sensual heat in them that excited me more than I cared to admit. My own body reacted in kind as a thrill of warmth ran up my back. I set my hand against his firm chest to push myself a little further away, but a soft growl escaped his lips.

I couldn’t explain it, but some secret voice deep inside me told me that this feral man, this dragon creature, had been lurking beneath the surface since the very moment we first met. I was both flattered and flustered. His intentions were clear, and my own body wasn’t helping matters.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and tamped down the heat in my body. “N-now listen here, dragon man. I’m not just a piece of sexy meat you can carry around out of cold storage. Whatever your customs are about wooing females, I’m not ready to jump into your nest egg.”

The feral look in his eyes faltered, and then vanished to nothing. He stared ahead again and pursed his lips. “I’m sorry. I should have warned you from the beginning.”

I frowned. “About what exactly?”

Luca turned his face away. “About your reason for being here, but that is a long discussion that must wait for another time. We’re almost there.”

I looked ahead of us and watched the castle come closer. A large balcony on one of the lowest levels looked out over the circular courtyard at the front base of the imposing structure. Luca landed us there and set me down.

He kept a gentle grasp on one of my hands and I turned to face him. “I have to find the key before the dwarf king decides to renovate parts of my city. You’ll be safe inside the castle.”

I gave his hands a squeeze. “Then I’m coming with you.”

He shook his head. “I can’t guarantee your safety, and I’ve already done enough harm to you that I won’t allow any more to come to you.”

I frowned. “I’m a big girl, and besides, you’re the only one I know from here.”

Luca looked past me and at the pair of white doors that led inside. "Here comes someone you may trust."

I turned to watch an older man of a height over six feet walk through the doors. He wore a red robe that accented his extreme pallor. His age appeared to be within a decade of Methuselah, on his left hand was a signet ring that featured a red rose. He appeared to not so much walk as float over the stones, and he stopped a few feet away from the door and bowed his head to us.

A man of darker complexion followed the robed gentleman, and I noticed a slight similarity between Luca and him. The eyes were the same, what with that strange tinge of green, and the nose was similar.

Luca set his hand on the small of my back and led me over to them. The tall man lifted his head and revealed a pair of eyes so devoid of color that they appeared almost white. He offered me a hand and a smile, and when he spoke, I noticed he had a slight accent in his words. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss-?"

I gave him my hand. "Bray. Diana Bray."

He wrapped his fingers around my hand but made no attempt to put my hand to his lips like I expected. "You have a warmth about you that is most becoming, Miss Bray."

The young man at his side grinned. "Don't I get a chance to kiss the hand of my cousin's lovely bride?"

Luca stepped up to the man's side and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Diana, this is Cassius Luminare. As he mentioned, he's a cousin of one of the more gifted branches."

Cassius laughed. "You flatter me, cousin, but compared to my father I am a mere parlor trickster."

"You have far enough skill to perform the task I entrust with you now," Luca insisted as he rested his gaze on me. His smile softened and he used his free hand to gesture to me. "Miss Bray is in dire need of protection."

The old man nodded. "We were informed of the kidnapping attempt, Your Highness, but unfortunately the men responsible remain elusive."

Luca pursed his lips. "I suspect it's the Trulio gang. I captured one of their ilk, but magic prevented him from speaking."

Cassius grinned and patted one side of his breast. "I might be able to make him talk."

Luca shook his head. "That's impossible. The magic burned away his body."

The old man frowned. "That is quite unusual for pirates to have such magic."

Cassius nodded. "I agree. They usually look down on suicide missions like that, preferring the motto 'live to thief another day.'"

"The reward must be worth disregarding their motto," Luca mused as he sidled up to my side. He slipped his hand around one of mine and smiled at me. "But regardless, you'll be safe here with them until I return."

I frowned, but the pig-headed look in his eyes told me arguing would have been pointless. "You just take care of yourself. I've got too many questions to ask you for you to up and die on me."

He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a light kiss on the back. "Your wish is my command. I'll return as soon as I can."

Luca released me and turned away. He sprinted across the balcony and flung himself over the edge. My heart leapt like he did, and I raced to the tall wall that surrounded the balcony. Much was my relief as I watched him glide over the rooftops and disappear into the jungle of buildings and trees. I grasped the railing tightly in my hands and bit my lower lip.

A few whispered words left my lips. "Don't you dare not come back..."



“He’ll be fine,” Cassius assured me as he stepped up to my side with a smile on his lips. “He’s been trying all his life to get himself killed, and it hasn’t worked out yet.”

I blinked at him as the old man joined us. “What the young master wishes to tell you is that His Highness has been less than careful in his personal safety, and yet he still lives.”

Cassius laughed. “I’m as bad at my words as I am at my magic, aren’t I? Anyway, as Sfetnic says, Luca will be just fine. What you need to do is focus on your own safety.”

I tilted my head to one side. “Sefnet?”

He grinned as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the taller man. “He’s Sfetnic. It’s not easy to pronounce, but I think he likes it that way.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on Sfetnic’s pale lips as he slightly inclined his head. “If I may be of service in any way...”

Cassius’ eyes danced with mischief. “Always the flatterer. Now about protecting you.” He returned his attention to me. “The guards were a little vague on what happened to you after you ran. Mind giving us the details?”

I told them my story, and by the time I was finished Cassius had a frown on his face. He folded his arms and cupped his chin in one hand. “Luca wasn’t joking. These pirates mean business, and not the good kind.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “I’ll be safe in the castle, won’t I?”

He dropped his arms and laughed. “Of course. I’ll show you to your room right now. It’s a bit of a maze in there” He jerked his thumb over his

shoulder and in the direction of the doors, “so you’ll need a guide at all times until you learn the ropes, or corridors, in this case.”

Sfetnic stepped forward and bowed his head to me. “I would like to offer my services to our beautiful guest.”

Cassius’ smile faltered a little and he raised an eyebrow. “Why hoard all the beauty to yourself? We can share.”

Sfetnic cast a side look at the other man, and the look in the older guy’s eyes gave me the impression that they weren’t exactly friends. “I have duties to fulfill regarding the joining.”

Cassius shrugged. “Alright, but I expect a tete-a-tete later, after you’ve finished boring her to death.” He returned his attention to me and grasped my hand where he planted a gentle kiss on the top. “Until that wonderful time comes, I’ll see that the magic in the castle is at full strength. If you’ll excuse me.” He inclined his head to both of us and hurried away.

Sfetnic watched him with that strange way of looking out of the corners of his eyes before he looked back to me. He stepped to one side and swept a long, thin arm toward the doors. “If you will follow me.”

We walked together through the doors, and I had my first view of the corridors. The stonework on the outside was the same inside, but with more posh and polish. Tapestries and marble heads on pedestals decorated the walls of the hall, and wood doors interrupted the adornments at odd intervals. The corridor ran straight, and to either side of us, and a set of large stone steps cut the central hall in half.

I looked left and right. There weren’t even stairs, just more doors. “This doesn’t look too complicated.”

Sfetnic showed off that peculiar pale smile of his. “The castle of the dragon kings is very old, and much magic has been imbued into its walls. Not all of it has been beneficial.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Meaning what?”

He beckoned me with a long, bony finger before striding forward. I followed, reluctant to be left behind and hesitant to follow this strange man. “There have been several times where the castle was breached by invading forces. The reigning kings sought to protect themselves and their loved ones via befuddlement spells. Unfortunately-”

“They wrote on the walls in permanent marker,” I quipped.

He inclined his head. “Precisely. The magics left their mark forevermore, and to this day strangers have lost their way among the

incantations of old.”

I smiled. “So, they were found a couple of days later with a hell of a thirst and a story to tell the grandkids?” Sfetnic showed off that peculiar smile of his. My eyes widened and my mouth dropped slightly open. “They were found, weren’t they?”

He looked ahead, and that peculiar smile didn’t fade. “Eventually.”

I slipped closer to him as he led me up the stairs. The next floor had the exact same layout, and a creeping sensation ate at the edges of my mind as we continued up the next flight. We arrived at a new floor, or was it?

I paused in the corridor as Sfetnic continued the climb and looked down the hallway. There were tapestries and statues, just like the other two floors. “Why do I get the feeling we’ve been here before?”

Sfetnic paused on the landing and looked down at me. “Because we have.”

I scurried up to him and tried to tamp down the panic in my voice. “You don’t happen to know a quick way of memorizing this place before I find myself experiencing my very own Groundhog Day, do you?” He gave me a quizzical expression. My shoulders drooped at the loss in translation. “I don’t want to get lost. How do I avoid that?”

He looked up at the flight of steps above us. ““Thrice high to get where you are going, twice down to get where you were, once below to get to the bottom.”

I blinked at him. “Come again?”

Sfetnic used an upturned hand to gesture at the higher stairs. “Three times we go up to reach the suites of His Highness.” He dropped his hand down to the floor. “Twice down the stairs to get to the balcony.” My strange guide pointed at the stones with one finger. “Once down to get to the ground floor.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “So, if I go down one flight I’ll be at the bottom?”

He held up three bony fingers. “Three times. Twice to reach where you were and once more to trigger the magic to get to the foyer.”

I wrinkled my nose. “So, you have to do this every time you go up and down the stairs.”

He turned his face slightly toward me and there was that strange smile of his again. “Only when I grow weary of the trick.” He lifted his hand and placed the palm against the stones to his left.

My jaw dropped as the cracks came alive with every color of the rainbow. The vibrant, luminous light swept through the mortar lines and illuminated all the walls around us. I spun in a circle and gaped at the wondrous sight. The light lasted for a few long moments before it faded into the walls.

Sfetnic removed his hand, and those pale eyes showed a glimmer of bemusement at me. "There. That will work."

I turned to him with my shocked face. "What did you do?"

"I merely 'paused' the magic in the walls," he told me as he turned to face the upper flight. "Now we will have little problem reaching the top."

He strode up the stairs, and I scurried to catch up to his side. "If you can do that then why all the trouble with the rhyme?"

"The magic is too old and too deeply embedded into the castle for my skills to overcome," he admitted as we proceeded up the next flight. "Thus, the pause lasts for only a few minutes. Nothing more."

I looked him up and down. "Then you're a magician?" He certainly had the right attire.

Sfetnic chuckled, but I detected a hint of bittersweetness in his voice. "I am... a student of matters best left to the dustbin of history. My studies have granted me a certain bit of control over magic, and so I use it sparingly."

I furrowed my brow as I thought back to the conversation on the balcony. "Can Luca use magic?"

One of his eyes darted to me. "You mean as opposed to Lord Cassius?"

I shrugged. "I suppose. I don't really know much about any of this stuff."

Sfetnic stared ahead of us as we reached a new level and a new staircase. I was glad to see that the decor changed, though it was more of the same with tapestries and statues. "Luca is capable of a limited amount of magic, though now that you are here there is no telling of what he's capable."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's that mean?"

His eyes twinkled, and though he didn't look at me I still had the feeling his eyes were on me. "It means, Miss Bray, that you are a link to his full potential. A catalyst, as it were, to unlocking his true dragon self."

I blinked at him. "I still don't follow."

Sfetnic paused before the landing to the next staircase and turned to face me with that peculiar smile of his. “You are his mate, Miss Bray. Through you he will create not only his future, but your mere presence will manifest within him his dragon magic, allowing him to control the throne on which he precariously sits.”

**M**y eyes widened and I shook my head. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I fear you shouldn’t,” Sfetnic mused as he turned back to the stairs and ascended the next flight.

I hurried to catch up again and frowned. “But I thought the dragon kings were popular.”

Sfetnic nodded. “As they are, but popularity breeds envy, and power is always tempting to those too weak to reject its allure.”

I raised an eyebrow as I studied the man’s pale face. “You have anybody in mind who wants this power trip?” He cast me a slightly perplexed look. “Who wants the throne?”

Sfetnic shook his head. “Only suspicions, and they are not enough to act upon.”

“Then who do you suspect?” I persisted.

He grinned at me. “Everyone.”

Sfetnic quickened his speed and left me behind. “You can’t be a little more specific?” I scolded him as I hurried to catch up. “I’d like to know who I’m not supposed to turn my back to.”

We reached the last landing, and I was grateful to find there were no more stairs. The hall in which we found ourselves was different than all the others. Gone were the tapestries and statues, and in their places were long murals that decorated both sides of walls. The pictures stretched the full length of the corridor and depicted scenes of dragons hunting their wild prey, and of dragon men with leathery wings upon their back

partaking in the daily lives of humans and other humanoid creatures who reminded me of Pennae, but some more closely resembled pigs, others sheep, and still others animals I couldn't quite recognize.

Sfetnic shook his head. "They will not be so foolish as to commit such an obvious act of treason. Their ways would be more subtle and designed to hide their guilt in the matter."

"Comforting..." I muttered as I swept my eyes over the walls that populated the corridor. "Why is this hall different from the others?"

"These are the private quarters of the king," he explained as he stopped us in front of a pair of ornate wooden doors.

I lifted an eyebrow. "All this for one guy?"

He turned to me with a twinkle in his eyes. "One 'guy,' and his queen."

Sfetnic kept his eyes on me as he pushed open the doors with one hand. They swung inward and revealed the lavish apartment in which I'd found myself earlier.

My heart faltered a little when I wasn't greeted by the handsome face of Luca, but I shook off the unfamiliar disappointment and pointed at the interior. "So, I stay in here until when?"

"Until we deem it safe for you."

I sighed. "All right, but I hope I won't be an old hag when I come out."

Sfetnic chuckled as I walked past him and into the room. "I doubt such a fate will ever befall someone so beautiful. In the meantime," He grasped the handles in both his pale hands and bowed his head to me, "I wish you a good morning, My Queen."

A wide range of emotions swirled about inside me at the title even as he closed the doors behind himself. I strolled over to the bed and leaned against one of the large foot posts. The room offered no more scenery than it had before, and so my mind wandered back to the eventful day. All the trouble centered around that theft, and the lack of a witness to describe the two men.

My eyes widened as I was struck with a brilliant idea.

I hurried to the door and grasped the handles but paused. They weren't locked, but my determination had faltered somewhat as I realized there was no way Sfetnic would let me join the hunt. He would take the information and give it to the guards, and I'd be left out in the cold. That is, if I could even find him among the mess of corridors and rooms.

A sigh escaped my lips as I grasped the bed post and eased myself onto the bed. A yelp then blurted from my lips, and I immediately jumped back onto my feet. Something had jabbed me in my thigh. I rummaged in my pocket and came out with the feather Pennae had gifted me.

A devious plan popped into my mind.

I hurried to the window and leaned out. The long, steep drop presented itself to me as before. That was a problem for a mere mortal, but a bird woman, on the other hand...

I turned away from the window and held up one arm while my other hand grasped the feather. The point of the shaft hovered over the top of my wrist. I hesitated as doubt began to creep into my mind.

What the heck was I even doing?

Here I was trapped in a strange new world with strange new people, and I was tempting fate by going outside on my own. I'd been chased, crowded upon, and seen conjury beyond my imagination, and more of the same waited for me out there. There was also that whole kidnapping thing Luca had done with me.

What about that peaceful, boring world I once lived in, with its securities and sameness?

A grin spread across my lips and my heart, only a short while ago so still and suppressed, leapt inside my chest.

I grasped the feather tightly in one hand and brushed the thumb and forefinger on my other hand up the soft vane. Small sparkles of colored dust flew out from the tips of the vane and floated out. They danced above my head for a few seconds before they whisked away into the metropolis.

It felt like an eternity before I saw a gleam of light float out of the streets at the foot of the castle like a tiny comet, and behind that comet came Pennae. The sparkles floated upward, and she tilted her head back to follow. Those dancing lights swept around my head before they slipped back into the feather.

I leaned out the window and waved my whole arm at her. Pennae waved back, and then gave me an exaggerated shrug. I pointed at the window sill, and even from that distance I saw her sharp mouth drop open. She furiously shook her head and pointed a feathered hand in the direction of the gate.

I shook my head and cupped my hands over my mouth. "The window!"



Pennae threw her arms up and shook her head. I clasped my hands together and leaned out so she could see my pleading face. Big mistake.

I yelped as I felt my waist slip over the smooth edges of the stone sill. My arms flailed about, and my hands managed to catch the edges of the window frames. I dug my nails into the wooden lattice that connected the panes, but I still slipped far out of the window. My hair fell loose on either side of my face as I looked down that dizzying height. I could feel my fingernails scrape along the wood as I slowly lost my grip. I was going to have plenty of time to scold myself for a lot of poor life choices.

Pennae's feathered face paled and she flung her arms out on either side of her. She leapt into the air and flapped hard. White feathers burst out of her long sleeves, and she was propelled upward by the wind beneath those magnificent wings. She flew as fast as a hawk and tumbled into me. I went flying backward and together we rolled across the room. We crashed into the door with Pennae on top of me.

Pennae rolled off of me and sat back on her haunches. She breathed hard and what little of her cheeks I could see under tufts of feathers was red. "What... are you... thinking?"

I clutched my chest over my furiously beating heart and sheepishly smiled at her. "I'm not sure that played into the equation."

She frowned at me. "You almost got yourself killed, and for what?"

My humor dropped off. "For a chance for both of us to help your king."

I quickly told her my plan, and when I had finished Pennae was still frowning. “You could ask one of His Highness’ advisers for help.”

I eased myself onto my feet and winced when half a dozen bruises complained. “I could, but I’m not. I know what the guy looks like, and they don’t. That’ll make finding him a lot faster, especially if he isn’t there anymore.”

Pennae shook her head. “This doesn’t sound safe at all.”

I set a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. “I know, but I just need you to get me out of here and to the museum. That’s all I’m asking.” She pursed her lips and my heart fell a little. “Please.”

Pennae stared at me for a moment longer before she sighed. “Very well.”

I let out a squeal and grasped her hands in mine. “Thank you so much!”

She shook her head. “But no farther than the museum. My wings are out of shape and carrying someone for great distances tires me very quickly.”

I nodded. “Of course!” I paused and looked her over. “How are you going to carry me, anyway?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t you know? Isn’t that why you summoned me?”

I gave her another sheepish smile. “To tell you the truth I didn’t think I’d get past rubbing the feather. All this magic is a little-well, new to me.”

She nodded. "Of course. As the Mother, it's expected that you're unfamiliar with our traditions."

I arched an eyebrow. "Where do you guys think I'm from?"

Pennae shrugged. "The Mothers have been from many places-" A noise came from the hall. Footsteps.

A gruff voice was the first one to speak. "The magicks sensed an intruder through the window."

The reply came from Sfetnic. "I am sure there is nothing to worry about. The Mother is no doubt unharmed."

There was a gruff harumph. "As captain, I am duty-bound to investigate, though I suspect you know something of the matter, Sfetnic."

A slight chuckle echoed down the passage. "I know nothing other than our Queen is high-spirited."

"She's no queen yet."

I grabbed Pennae's shoulders and spun her around to face the window. "Whatever needs to happen to get me out of here, do it quickly!"

Pennae turned the tables and pulled me in front of her. "Climb onto the windowsill."

I gingerly did as instructed as the footsteps came closer to the door. Pennae crawled up behind me and looped her arms under mine. My heart thumped in my chest as I looked down at the death that eagerly awaited me. If Luca hadn't healed my heart, then I bet it would have exploded.

Pennae pushed her body against mine and sent us reeling over the edge. Instinct told me to scream, and boy did I scream. The shrill, high-pitched noise echoed up and down the castle walls as we plummeted toward the ground.

Pennae wrapped her legs around my waist and opened her winged arms. A great updraft caught us and jerked us upward so that we were very nearly even with the window from which we'd dropped. I took a long enough break from my heart attack to look over my shoulder. Sfetnic stood at the window with a man in armor at his side. The familiar pale figure had a slim smile on his lips while the other man sported sharp, angry eyes. He wore heavier armor than I'd seen before, and atop his head was a helmet with a crest like a mohawk.

I waved at them, and the next moment Pennae swooped down, taking us over the roofs of the homes and shops. The wind kissed my cheeks and

a laugh burst from my lips as we glided over the rooftops. People looked up and children waved to us.

I heard a groan from my flight commander. "I'll never live this down..."

I grinned up at her. "And I'll be forever grateful to you."

Some of her worry slipped away, but she still wrinkled her beaked nose as she gazed ahead of us. "I wouldn't mind a gold coin or a shop space of my own."

I laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

We swooped across the city and soon arrived at our majestic destination. Pennae set us down in a corner of the far western wing of the building. My legs shook a little as she set me on them, but she landed gracefully at my side. She stretched out her arms and her feathers slipped back into her skin.

I couldn't help but gawk at the beauty of it. "That is so amazing."

Pennae turned her face to the side and shrugged, but I could see a glimmer of glee in her eyes. "It's nothing. Just a little practice with the ancient art of flying."

I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the monumental steps. "And art is exactly what we need to see about."

"But I was just supposed to fly you here!" she protested.

I stopped and turned to face her as some of my humor faded. A sigh escaped my lips as I released her. "Yeah, I guess you're right." I stepped backward away from her and smiled. "Thanks for the ride, and I'll look into what I can do about that shop."

Pennae pursed her lips. "I... I may be of some help to you still."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "No, it's fine, really. Besides, I can't guarantee this won't be dangerous."

Pennae stretched to her full height, which coincidentally was a few inches taller than me, and stiffened her jaw. "Then all the more reason to go with you. I did hand you my feather, after all, and it would be a humiliation if I were to let something happen to you so soon after giving you that."

I jumped forward and enveloped her a big hug. She let out a small yelp of surprise before I pulled back and grinned her hand. "Then let's go, partner."

We raced along the front of the western wing and soon arrived at the front of the museum. I scanned the wide steps, but just as I feared the tell-tale spot was empty. The artist was gone. Still, there was hope.

Pennae looked around at all the lounging people. “Do you see what you’re looking for?”

I shook my head. “No, but I have a Plan B.”

She furrowed her brow. “A Plan... B?”

“I’ll show you,” I promised as I hurried up the stairs, and she scurried after me.

We slipped inside and I noticed Miss Smith behind the front desk. Her stoic face showed a hint of surprise at our coming, and she met us at the counter. “Miss Bray, this is an unexpected surprise.”

“For both of us,” I assured her as I nodded at an empty table across the room. “Mind if we talk alone?”

She smiled and gestured to a door behind the desk. “My office would be more private.”

Pennae and I scooted around the desk and Miss Smith led us into her office. It was a cramped room, but not because of the size so much as the quantity of stuff contained in its four walls. Bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling along two of the walls, while the other two sported maps and pinned paperwork. The floor was covered in books and scattered bits of paper and folders bursting with documents young and old.

I sidestepped past a stack of books as tall as me as Miss Smith meandered her way along a narrow path to her impressive oak desk. She took a seat on the corner while Pennae and I stopped in front of her. “Where is His Highness?”

I shrugged. “He’s out on his own trail, but I thought I’d give him a hand with my own leads for finding the key, and I think there’s a guy who can help me do that.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? And who might that be?”

“This morning there was a guy on the steps. He’s a few years younger than me and is an artist. He might be able to help.” A strange expression crossed her face. I leaned back and blinked at her. “What? Is he a regular around here?”

She slowly nodded her head. “He is often on the stairs, but why do you want to see that artist in particular?”

I pointed in the direction of the stairs. “Because he had a whole pile of sketches of the people who were passing by. If he remembers who went in and out around that time, he might have a picture that could help us identify the two men. Heck, he might even be able to give us a direction of where they went.”

That same unusual look on her face had diminished, but just a little as she slid off the corner of her desk. “I see. Then I will take you to him personally.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You know where he is?”

A touch of a smile curled the corners of her lips. “I know where he might be but come. Let’s see if he can help us.”

Miss Smith strode past Pennae and me. We looked at each other, and I shrugged before we followed. Smith led us past the front desk where she slightly inclined her head to one of the ladies, who returned the gesture. We strode out the doors and into the bright midday sun. My heart couldn't help but leap a little. The hours were ticking away to the deadline of the dwarf king's ultimate.

Miss Smith hurried across the courtyard, and we dove into the depths of the meandering streets. In a short while and after a half dozen turns, I found myself quite lost. Even Pennae peered around us with a quizzical expression on her face.

I leaned in close. "Do you have any idea where we're going?"

She shook her head. "No, though the area looks quite... tired."

She could say that again. The houses had gotten small and had a look of tiredness on their peeled-paint walls and dirty windows. Ditches ran on either side of the cobblestone road, and those were littered with trash. Tiny gardens in the back and a few trees here and there were the only bright spots of an otherwise blighted neighborhood.

I looked to our guide. "Does Luca know this place is here?"

Miss Smith turned her face to one side to look at me with one eye as she nodded. "Yes, but change is not always quick nor easy. The homes in the Goodle-"

"The what?" I interrupted.

"The Goodle. A corruption of Goodwill, which is what the refugees called it when they first came." She nodded at the houses to our right.

“These homes are among the oldest in the city and were built in a hasty manner during one of the early wars with invaders to house victims from other city states. They have always been structurally unsound, but their owners are attached to them and are reluctant to make changes.”

An old woman shuffled out the front door of her tiny cottage with a straw broom in hand. She looked over at us and her eyes lit up as they fell on our guide. “Little Mia! What in all the five continents are you doing here?”

A smile spread across Miss Smith’s lips as she stopped us. “I’m just looking for Ethan, Mrs. Crowley. Is he around?”

The old woman nodded up the street. “Yep. Just got back from one of his ‘trips,’ if you know what I mean.”

Smith pursed her lips. “Only too clearly, Mrs. Crowley. Thank you for telling me-”

“Now don’t you go getting away without introducing me to your pretty young friends,” Mrs. Crowley insisted as she pointed the top of the broom handle at Pennae and me. “And one of them has a strange air about her. Is she a witch?”

Smith turned to us with a slight twinkle of mischief in her eyes. “Not quite, Mrs. Crowley. This is Miss Bray and-”

Pennae bowed her head to the elderly woman. “Pennae, of the Cloud Clan.”

Mrs. Crowley returned the bow with a smile. “A pleasure to meet you both, now off with you.” She gave her broom a sweep in our direction. “I can see in your eyes that you’re in a hurry.”

We hurried onward, but I couldn’t help but cast a curious look at my feathered companion. “Cloud Clan?”

She nodded. “Yes. We avius belong to clans, and each clan has their own unique relationship with a part of nature.”

“Your clan must be special to have a relationship with the clouds,” I mused.

She shook her head. “No. There are rival clans who claim the clouds as their own.” She looked ahead of us and pursed her lips. “Unfortunately, many battles have been fought over those titles, though not for many years.”

We soon found ourselves in front of a little hovel with a single window looking out on the street. A long planter box hung below the window, and a



few scraggly flowers offered a picture of beautiful blooms to anyone who passed by. I noticed Miss Smith took a deep breath before she stepped up to the door and knocked.

A male voice greeted us. "Go away!"

Smith pursed her lips. "It's me, Ethan."

There was a long pause before something made of glass crashed against the door. "Keep going away!"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm coming in anyway."

She grasped the simple rough wooden knob and opened the door. Pennae and I followed her inside where we found a worn wood floor and roughly hewn clapboard walls. The hovel was split into two rooms, with a large room in the front and a dividing wall cutting off the last third. Ancient furniture dotted the room, including a coffee table and a lounging couch. A man was in current use of the lounge, and I recognized him as the artist I'd seen earlier, albeit with a swell of red color on his cheeks.

One of his arms draped over the edge of the cushions and the other one hugged a half-finished brown bottle against his chest. I didn't need to belong to this world to recognize that it was alcohol. The place, too, reeked of his inebriation, and a dozen other bottles lay around spicing up the air with the aroma of their former contents.

The house, too, had a large variety of papers scattered about that resembled Smith's office. There were white and brown sheets, both thick and thin. Some were pinned to the walls and others lay in heaps on the floor. A few folders were bursting with papers, and hardly a one was without some sketch or full drawing.

A look of fury crossed Miss Smith's face before she marched over to the couch and crossed her arms over her chest. Her shadow fell across the man, who opened his bleary eyes and blinked up at her. "Who are ya?"

"Your sister, that's who."

Pennae and my mouths both dropped open. The man merely offered her a lopsided grin. "Are you now? I thought you were a pixie." He took a drink of the bottle and wrinkled his nose. "An ugly pixie."

Smith snatched the bottle from his weak grip and slammed its bottom down hard on the wooden coffee table. "I didn't come here to trade insults, you fool. The kingdom needs your help."

A smile spread across his lips as he closed his eyes and laughed. "The kingdom? What do I care for the kingdom?" He raised his arms above his

head and stared up at the ceiling with slightly wide, blood-shot eyes. "Give me a kingdom and I would trade it for a box of pencils!"

Smith glared down at him. "When are you going to grow up and realize not everything is about your art?"

Some of the drunken stupor fell from his face as Ethan scowled up at her. "The day you turn in that precious library badge of yours and realize not everything is about the past."

Smith snorted as she stepped to one side and swept her arm over the room. "Who's living in the past?"

Ethan sat up and draped his arms over his bent legs as he studied the house. "Mother and Father would have wanted one of us to keep it."

Smith shook her head. "Not this way. Mother would have had a fit if she saw what you've done to the place."

He tilted his head back slightly and cast a look of annoyance at her. "Listen, I didn't invite you here, so why don't you go back to that little white tower you live in and leave me alone?"

"Because somewhere in this mess-" She waved her hand at the piles of papers, "-there might be a way to help with the trouble at the gate."

He shrugged. "What's that to me?"

Smith glared at him. "You idiot! This house is nothing without the kingdom! Everything would crumble-"

"Unless I kept under the tender and merciful wings of your dragon lord," Ethan mused as he gave her a crooked smile. "Is that it? Tell me, dear sister, which do you love more? The dragon or his museum?"

A slight blush accented Smith's cheeks. Her hand flew out and would have connected with his cheek if he hadn't caught her wrist in his grip.

He grinned up at her. "Did I hit the mark, Mia?"

Smith yanked her hand out of his grasp and stepped back from him. "You're hopeless." She turned to Pennae and me and nodded at the door. "There's nothing more here we can do."

Smith strode past us and Pennae made to follow her, but she paused and looked back where I still stood facing the seated man. He had bowed his head and his hands hung listlessly between his bent legs.

I walked over to him and plopped myself on the cushion beside him. He lifted his head and frowned at me. "What do you want?" The man paused and leaned forward as he squinted his eyes. A perplexed look passed over his face. "Do I... do I know you?"

I smiled at him. “Don’t you recognize your muse?”

His eyes lit up with recognition. “I remember you now. You walked with the king into the museum, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, and right now he needs your help.” I picked up a sketch from the coffee table and showed it to him. “I want the guy who can make such beautiful images care about those people he drew. They need your help, too.”

Ethan’s expression faltered as he cast a dark look at Smith. “You came with my sister, and I can’t forget that.” He turned his face away from me. “I’m not your man.”

I sighed but stood and looked down at him. “Tell us if you ever change your mind. We could really use your help.”

I moved toward my companions, and that’s when a horrific pain struck me in the chest.

I froze and my eyes widened as a sudden agony spread through my body. A gasp escaped my lips as my legs buckled beneath me and I fell onto my knees, catching myself with my hands. I'd had attacks of the heart before, but nothing like this. This felt like my heart was pumping pain into every crevice of my being down to my soul.

"Diana!" Pennae shouted as she knelt beside me and grasped my arms. "What's wrong?"

I clutched a hand over my chest and shook my head. Tears streamed down my cheeks. "I... I don't know."

Miss Smith bent down in front of me and studied me for a moment before she pursed her lips. "The union of hearts."

Pennae whipped her eyes up to our companion. "What does that mean?"

"All mates to the dragon king have weak hearts in their world, but by finding the king and being brought over to our world their heart is made whole. Whole, that is, because the piece of their heart that is 'missing' comes from the dragon king himself," she explained as she set a hand on my shoulder. "Because of that union, whenever one is in pain, the other feels their torment."

Pennae's eyes revealed her anguish as she looked back at me. "Can't we do anything to stop this?"

"We need to find where His Highness is and stop what's happening to him."

Even as she spoke, I felt the tremors of pain fade. I took in a deep, gasping breath as relief washed over me. Relief, and fear. I whipped my face up to Smith as a chilling thought entered my mind. "It... it stopped. What does that mean?"

She pursed her lips. "It means His Highness is no longer in pain."

My pained heart skipped a beat. "But he's not dead, is he?"

She shook her head. "No."

"You're sure of that?"

Smith looked over her shoulder and glared at Ethan. "You may not care about the kingdom, but what about two lives? If something happens to His Highness then she dies, too."

A mix of emotions crossed Ethan's face before he sighed and stood. "Alright, what was it you needed?"

I lifted my head and smiled at him. "Thank you."

He shrugged and shook his head. "Don't thank me yet. I'm not even sure I have what you're looking for."

"Your sketches from earlier today when the museum was robbed," Mia told him as she swept her eyes over the cluttered room. "We're trying to identify the two thieves. They may have come in together or separately, and we're not even sure when they came in, but it had to have been before the eight o'clock tour."

Ethan furrowed his brow as he strode over to his folder which I'd seen at his side earlier that day. He rummaged through the stacks of papers before he came back with two sheets which he held out to his sister. "These might be the ones."

Mia took the paper and studied them a moment before she looked up at him. "Why these ones?"

He nodded at them. "Because they came in separately, but they left together. I thought that was strange."

Mia lifted an eyebrow. "And you're sure of this?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I have a couple of sketches of other people between them who passed me before the woman walked past."

Pennae blinked at him. "Woman?"

He shrugged. "One of them was a woman, the other a heavyset man with the smell of the sea on him." He tapped one of the papers Mia held. "He also had that tattoo on his wrist, though he tried to hide it. I noticed he

pulled on his sleeve a few times walking along the courtyard toward the museum.”

Pennae and I crowded around behind Miss Smith, and sure enough there was a hint of a tattoo on the man’s hand. Mia squinted at the drawing. “Is that... a seagull?”

Ethan cracked a smile. “I think it is, which means he’s probably a fan of The Gull.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Who’s the gull?”

He shook his head. “Not a person, a place. The seediest bar on the ‘wharf.’”

Pennae frowned. “But Amnisis’ port is some ten miles away.”

A wry smile spread across Ethan’s lips. “A short distance for a seaman accustomed to thousands of miles, and The Gull caters to those water walkers bold enough to venture this far inland.”

Mia crossed her arms over her chest and frowned at him. “Is your information reliable?”

He spread his arms wide and grinned. “You’re looking at one of their finest patrons. They have some of the best rum in the city.”

Mia pursed her lips but said nothing as she turned to Pennae and me. Her attention focused mostly on me. “Are you feeling well enough to travel?”

I nodded. “I’m fine, and I’ll feel even better when we find Luca.”

“Then let’s go.” She strode toward the door.

Ethan’s loud clearing of his throat made us all pause and turn to him. “Do any of you gentile ladies happen to know where The Gull is?”

Pennae and I shrugged, and Mia sighed. “No.”

He strutted to the door and opened it for us with a sweep of an arm. “Then allow me to be your guide.”

Mia crossed her arms and lifted an eyebrow. “Aren’t you too drunk to even know at what you’re throwing a bottle?”

Ethan gestured to the wall beside the door. We followed his direction and my eyes widened as I beheld a trough. The long, short metal bin was filled with every color of bottle imaginable. There were purples, pinks, browns, blues, and even a magenta. They were broken, but together they shone like a trapped rainbow.

He slipped over to the trough and picked up one of the pieces of colored glass. “I use these pieces in my art. Nothing is quite as cheap as

cheap rum.” He flicked the glass back into the bin and grinned at us. “Now, shall we?”

“And quickly,” I added.

Ethan led us out of the house and down the street. Mia followed behind him, and Pennae and I trailed behind them. I couldn’t help but notice that she gawked at the scenery almost as much as I did, so I leaned close to her and lowered my voice.

“Have you been in Amnisis very long?”

She winced and shook her head. “No. I arrived from my village only two weeks ago.”

“With plans to open a shop?”

Her eyes lit up as she nodded. “Oh yes! I have so many designs in my head and being here inspires even more! And there are so many people to sell to!”

“So, where’s your village?”

She pointed to our left. “To the north near the top of the Altum Peaks. My flock has been there for more generations than we have feathers.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Do you guys often leave?”

She shook her head. “No, but I want to make a name for myself, and Amnisis is the closest kingdom. I’ve heard all my life about the grand city, but I never imagined it would be this big.”

I swept my eyes over the endless array of streets and nodded. “I know how you feel. I come from a small town, too.”

Pennae leaned back and studied me. “What is your home like? Are there many of my people?”

I laughed and shook my head. “There aren’t any of you, but there’s not that many people to begin with.”

She wrinkled her sharp nose. “What a pity. We avius are among the best designers in the world.”

I looked her up and down. “Why’s that?”

She puffed up a little. “Our fashion sense is keen because our sharp eyes recognize more colors than any other species, and our feathers-” She stretched out one feathered hand, “-allow us to feel the texture of cloth and know what material was used in its making.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Wow. All that with just your feathers?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yep.”

“If you two would quicken your pace,” Mia reminded us from where she stood waiting with Ethan at the next intersection. “His Highness no doubt needs our assistance in getting himself out of this latest predicament.”

Pennae and I scurried up to them, and something in her words caught my attention. “So does he often get into this kind of trouble?”

Mia sighed as we continued onward. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Everyone knows about the dragon king and his adventures,” Pennae spoke up as she bobbed her head. “He’s one of the few monarchs in the world who’s willing to go out and deal with the dirty stuff on his own.”

Mia stared ahead of us and pursed her lips. “I only hope he hasn’t found himself in trouble too deep to come out of.”



Ethan led us through the dizzying maze of squalid buildings and into a messy business district. The rustic houses were replaced by just as rustic two-floor structures with false fronts, but not false pretenses as their weathered signs advertised booze from all kingdoms and all kinds of plants. I didn't even recognize some of the source names.

The clientele strode and loitered in the streets, and one look at them told me I wouldn't want to be out alone, day or night. There were men with peg legs, a few with some unsightly scars across their faces, and all manner of body adornment that shone through the patches in their worn clothes. I tried looking for the tell-tale sign of the gull, but everybody and their dog had a tattoo. I almost felt sorry for the little pug that passed by us, but he strutted his tattoo of a poodle on his side with his head held high.

Ethan stopped our group in front of one of the taller taverns, and a sign that hung over the door advertised its name as The Gull. He turned to us with less humor than before. "This is a rough place. Are you sure you want to come in here?"

Mia scowled at him. "We're coming in."

He shrugged. "Just thought I'd warn you."

Ethan led us inside with Pennae clinging to my arm. The interior was much like a plain bar with round tables and their chairs scattered about. A bar stretched the full length of the back wall, and the decor reminds me of a liquor store after a tornado flew through. The remains of bottles stuck

out of the cracks in the walls, and the floor was stained with more than just food.

Our large group caught the attention of more than one patron, and I received an appreciative leer from several of the men. A few looks of jealousy came from the women who hung off their arms. Ethan strode through the maze of furniture and bodies, and we stayed close behind him.

Not close enough, however, as one of the men snatched my hand and yanked me into his lap. He grinned and showed off two rows of teeth that would have made a dentist giddy. His breath wreaked of booze and onions. “How ya doing, honey?”

I pressed my hands against his grimy shirt and pushed my face away from his. “Seasick.”

He blinked at me before he let out a great bellowing laugh. “Seasick! That’s a good one!” He turned to his compatriots at the table. “Isn’t that a good one, fellas?” The fellas agreed, but their hanger-ons didn’t look at all amused.

A shadow loomed over my captor, and he looked up to find himself staring into the disapproving eyes of Mia. “Let her go.”

His grin broadened. “Well, well, if it ain’t another pretty catch. Lemme see how you feel-” He reached out for her wrist.

Mia backhanded him so hard his head wrenched to one side and there was a discernible crack. His grip on me weakened, and I scurried out of his grasp to stand shoulder to shoulder with Mia. The room grew quiet and the looks on the faces of the ‘fellas’ was one of horror.

The man straightened his head and slowly rose to his feet. He turned to us, and I watched in horror as his hands lengthened into claws. Bear claws. Black fur sprouted from his cheeks and his eyes took on a hideous yellow tinge.

His voice was deeper and like a growl it came from deep inside his throat. “You bitch. You’ll pay for that.”

He lifted his massive paw to strike her down, but Ethan slipped between them and held up his hands. “Wait a second!”

The bear man paused and snarled at him. “What do you want?”

Ethan jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the two of us. “These two fine ladies happen to be my friends.”

The man scoffed. “What’s that to me?”

Ethan slipped his long sleeve up his arm and showed him the underside. "And I happen to have other friends."

The bear studied the arm for a moment before his face paled. Even the tips of his fur looked like they turned white. He dropped his arm to his side and took a step back into the table. "I-I didn't mean anything by it. Honest."

Ethan drew down his arm and shook his head. "No problem. We'll just be on our way, and don't try to start any other messes, will you?"

The man nodded before he plunked himself back down in his chair. The others around the room did the same, but more than one curious look was cast at Ethan. He turned to us with a smile. "Follow a little bit closer."

He hurried onward, and I picked up Pennae as Mia and I scampered after him. Ethan led us to the far back right corner of the room and through a narrow door set into the wall. The door opened into an equally narrow hallway that stretched deep into the long building.

The moment the door shut behind us Mia grabbed Ethan's shoulder and spun him around. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

He shrugged. "Nothing."

She stabbed a finger at his arm. "'Nothing' doesn't get a bear man to sit back down in fear."

He rolled his eyes and drew his sleeve up reveal a tattoo of a crow. "It's just this."

Mia's jaw hit the floor. "The Crow? Do you know how dangerous that group is?"

I raised my hand. "I don't."

Pennae shook her head. "Nor do I."

Ethan smiled and held up his hands. "Listen, it's not what it looks like. See?" He pressed his thumb against the tattoo, and a tiny bit of the color smudged. "It's a fake tattoo. I use it to get out of trouble like that. Scares the heck out of everyone."

Mia frowned at him. "Even masquerading as one of them could get you killed."

"Nobody asks any questions about them," he assured her as he dropped his sleeve and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "But shouldn't we get moving? If His Highness is really being held by someone, they do it back here."

"How do you know that?" I asked him as we continued on our way.

He glanced over his shoulder at me. "I sketched some of the ladies here a few times. They're a lonely bunch who like to talk."

Our footsteps clumped hollow on the ancient wooden floorboards as we followed him down the corridor. A few doors were scattered along the walls here and there, many of different ages and pedigrees. People had carved their initials on the doors and some graffiti crowed about past conquests. I didn't need three guesses to know what took place behind those doors.

We reached the end of the hall and found ourselves faced with the back door and a staircase. Ethan chose neither. He tapped the toes of one foot against the floor. Three of us leapt back when the lower flight of stairs lifted up and revealed a hidden staircase that led downward. The sharp smell of saltwater stung my nostrils.

Ethan swept his arm toward the opening and grinned. "Welcome, ladies, to the Wharf."

He guided us down the stairs, and as we reached the bottom the hidden passage closed behind us. Light was provided by torches spaced evenly apart and with just enough glow to cast evil shadows on the rock walls. Far-off laughter and the sounds of chairs scooting along the stone floor echoed down the hall in which we found ourselves.

Ethan hurried us along, and the deeper we traveled the more dank the air became until I was practically breathing water and mold. Pennae cupped her hand over her nose and frowned. "This place is awful."

Ethan laughed. "Wait until you see the clientele."

The passage widened into a room about double the size of the saloon over our heads. The same tables and chairs made up the furniture, but the seated men sported seafaring attire like tight pants and open-fronted shirts. Handkerchiefs adorned the heads of many, and flat-heeled boots covered their feet. Their hands were worn by the rope and their faces weathered by the winds of the open seas.

It looked like Talk Like A Pirate Day.

The men scarcely paid us any heed as we meandered through their company. A few lifted their heads, but most kept their attention on their card games and wenches. The women in this quarter were even prettier and finer dressed than those upstairs. Very few of them gave me a look, much less one of envy.

Ethan swept his eyes over the area. “Anybody see who we’re looking for?”

Mia frowned at him. “And if we do, what’s your plan to arrest them?”

He sheepishly grinned and shrugged. “I was kind of hoping you’d have one.”

I scanned the room and my eyes settled on the far left corner. Shadows nearly swallowed a booth and seated in the darkness was a familiar heavy-set man with long sleeves. He cradled a half-finished mug between his hands.

Here was our prey.

I nudged Mia's arm with my elbow and nodded at the solitary man. She followed my gaze and pursed her lips. Her eyes flickered to her brother, and she slightly jerked her head toward the stranger. "Is that him?"

He noted where she indicated and studied the man for a moment before he nodded. "That's him."

Pennae grasped my arm with both hands and bit her lower lip. "So, what do we do now?"

Ethan straightened the collar of his filthy, paint-splattered shirt and offered his arm to me. "Shall we?"

I blinked at him. "Shall we what?"

He nodded at the man. "Go see if he's willing to talk."

Mia stepped between us and glared at her brother. "You will not put her in danger."

"I think that's for the pretty lady to decide," he insisted as he leaned to one side and caught my eye. "Besides, isn't her betrothed in more trouble?"

I stiffened my jaw and held my hand out to his. "Lead the way."

He grinned at his sister before he skirted around her and grasped my offered hand. Together we strolled through the tables. The other patrons hardly paid us any mind, but a strange itch teased the back of my mind. My heart fluttered a little as we came closer to the hulk of a man. He was even bigger up close and must have been well over six and a half feet tall with a broad chest.

He hardly looked up at our coming as Ethan bowed his head. "I'm sorry for the intrusion, but we couldn't help but notice that you were alone."

The man sneered at us before he returned his attention to his mug. "And I want it to stay that way."

"Come come, now," Ethan scolded him as he scooted onto the seat opposite the man, and I followed. He swept his arm over the establishment. "We're all friends here."

The man scoffed. "You're no friend of mine."

Ethan's grin widened as he drew up his other sleeve and revealed a tattoo in the shape of a seagull. "Aren't we?"

The man lifted one massive eyebrow and looked up at Ethan's face. His muscles tensed, and mine responded in kind as the fight-or-flight responses battled inside my head. I breathed out when a broad grin spread across his face, but somehow the tension in my heart didn't go away. "I guess we are. Never seen anyone with a Gull tattoo before 'cept me."

Ethan held out his hand. "Ethan's the name."

The man grasped it in a sturdy handshake. "Draven. Now then-" He drew his arm back and nodded at the tattoo on Ethan's arm. "Where'd you get the idea for that?"

Ethan tapped the side of his nose. "I'm always up for a pint, and there's no better place than the Gull."

I tried to focus on the banter between the pair, but my heart captured all my attention. The flutter had become a hard thump, and I felt as though something gave it a squeeze every now and again. My eyes inadvertently fell on the floor some ten feet away from us. The boards were just like the others, and yet I couldn't look away.

"Dear? Dearest?" Ethan gave my shoulder a shake.

I whipped my head back to him. "Huh?"

Ethan laughed. "We were just talking about the drink here and our new friend wanted to know your favorite."

I scouted about for an idea and my gaze fell on a nearby drink. "A Bloody Mary."

Draven frowned. "Never heard of it. What's in it?"

"Um-" My mind was wandering back to that spot on the floor. "Some tomato juice... some vodka... and a... a lot of salt." I stood and strolled over to the spot on the floor.

“Dearest?” Ethan called, but I paid him no mind as I furrowed my brow.

The beat of my heart had quickened. I tapped my foot on the floor and was disappointed when nothing happened.

“What’s she doing?” It was Draven asking the question, and he didn’t sound happy.

“She’s-um, fond of... of dancing,” Ethan explained as he slipped out of the booth and walked over to me. He wrapped his arm around my waist and grasped my hand in his other one. I was pulled into a slow dance as he leaned in close and dropped his voice to a whisper. “What are you doing?”

My eyes were glued to the floor as I shook my head. “I-I don’t know. There’s just something about this spot-” I gave it a hard tap with my foot.

That’s when something tapped back.

We both froze and Draven leapt to his feet. “Get away from there!” he snarled as he marched over to us.

He snapped his grimy fingers, and a dozen of the other patrons jumped up. Chairs clattered to the floor and several other clients scuttled back away from the crowd who now surrounded Ethan and me. My only relief was Mia and Pennae hadn’t been roped into the mess.

Draven stopped a few feet in front of us and crossed his arms over his expansive chest. “Who sent you? Was it someone from the castle?”

Ethan shook his head. “Nobody sent us. We-”

“Don’t lie to me!” Draven’s booming voice cut off my companion. A hint of red touched Draven’s cheeks as a few veins popped out of his neck. He nodded at two men close to us. The people strode over and grabbed Ethan’s arms, pinning them behind his back. Draven marched over and wrenched his sleeve up. He swiped his thumb over the gull tattoo and sneered as a faint sparkle of dust flew up. “Magic dust. Just as I figured.”

Ethan sheepishly grinned at him. “Would you look at that.”

Draven’s hand swung out and his fist connected with Ethan’s cheek. His head whipped to one side and a soft ‘oomph’ escaped his lips.

“Stop it!” I shouted as I raced over. One of the men grabbed my arm and yanked me back against the front of his stench-ridden shirt.

Draven’s eyes fell on me and took a more leering appearance. A smile curled onto his lips as he strolled over to me. “Yer a might pretty one for a spy. What say you and I get to know each other a little-”



A hand broke through the floorboards beneath Draven and the fingers wrapped around his ankle. His eyes bulged out of his head, and he let out a yelp as he was pulled through the floor, wood and all. That was the cue for the other patrons, and they stampeded out of the room, nearly trampling Mia and Pennae on their way out.

Draven's cohorts whipped their heads this way and that looking for their leader. Shouts and grunts came from beneath us, and Draven's voice sounded above the fray.

"Get back in yer cage, you damn animal!"

The reply was a hard crack of bone. The cohorts winced and some even shrank back away from the tell-tale hole.

Then there was silence.

The soundless air reverberated with fear and uncertainty. My own captor's hand quivered. The next moment it wasn't there, but the man hadn't run. A cry of fright came from him and as I felt myself freed, I spun around in time to watch him disappear into the floor. The broken boards revealed a subterranean tunnel system lit by oil lamps and smelling of dank dirt and saltwater.

The lamps illuminated two shadows, one my bandanna-wearing former captor and the other a person taller than his short stature. Their shadows danced about the walls, accompanied by the sounds of fists hitting flesh. The stranger captured the upper hand with an upper cut, and the sailor dropped to the floor.

Draven's other men drew out their cutlasses from their waistbands and threw Ethan to the side. They crept toward the hole as I scuttled back. Their faces showed a mixture of fear and fury. One of the men inched up to the edge and stretched his neck to look into the hole.

A figure shot out and gave him another upper cut that sent him flying into his friends. They crashed to the floor in a clump of panic and anger as the figure landed beside me. My mouth gaped open at Luca. His hands were taloned claws covered in scales, and the green shimmering flakes also covered some of his cheeks. Large white horns grew out of his temple and curved out behind him for a foot. A scaly tale stretched out from his fine butt and slammed against the floor.

The sailors scrambled to their feet and faced Luca with their cutlasses and pale faces. I slipped behind him as those hideous, weather-beaten

faces crept toward us, blood in their eyes but their cutlasses slightly shaking in their hands.

Hard footsteps strode across the floor and Miss Smith stopped near the wall between the pirates and us. Her attention lay on our foes. “If you value your lives, you will leave this place at once.” The men looked at one another, and in a split second they sprinted out of the room.

We had won. Sort of.

Luca winced and one of his legs buckled. He fell onto his knee and clutched his clawed hand over his heart. His sharp teeth clenched together as a strangled cry came from his lips.

I gasped as I felt the same pain reverberate through me. My legs, too, shook and I slumped to the floor.

“Diana!” Pennae shouted as she hurried to my side and grasped my arms. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

I lifted my gaze to Luca who shut his eyes. His face was a picture of focused pain as his dragon nature began to fade into his body. In a few seconds he was a man again. The pain I felt inside me faded as Luca’s attention fell on me.

Luca studied me for a long moment and his pained expression deepened. He stretched out his hand and grasped one of mine. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault.”

Miss Smith strode up to us and frowned down at him. “I, too, would like to hear how this came about.”

Ethan sauntered up to his sister’s side while brushing the dust off himself. “We might have heard a better story from those guys you let go.”

“Do you honestly think they would know anything?” she challenged him as she folded her arms over her chest. “Besides, they’re no doubt equipped with magical devices that prevent them from ever speaking.”

Luca eased himself onto his feet and with our joined hands he helped me onto mine. Pennae stayed close at my side.

I looked Luca over. His face was slightly pale and there was a strange, slightly unfocused look in his eyes. "What did they do to you?"

Miss Smith strode up to him and grabbed his jaw in her hands. She turned his head left and right as she studied his face. "Dragon Bane." She dropped her hold on him and he cupped one side of his face in one hand. "They were eager to capture you. There is hardly anything rarer in the world than that herb."

He flexed his loose arm and winced. "So I noticed." Luca dropped his arm and his face softened as he smiled at me. He cupped my cheek in his hand and smile at me. "But you freed me."

I blinked at him. "I did what?"

"Your dancing," Luca explained as he tapped the floor with one foot. "I felt your presence, and when I heard you being captured by the pirates it gave me the strength to awaken from my slumber and come to your aid."

Ethan sighed and shook his head. "As cute a moment as this is, don't we have bigger problems to worry about? Like a missing key?"

Luca's good humor faded as he pursed his lips. "The key isn't here, but I think I might know where it is. The main jailer was a little too loose with his tongue around me, thinking I was unconscious."

I couldn't help but look at the largest hole behind me. "I'm guessing that was Draven."

Luca nodded. "Yes. I followed the trail of the explosive magic used on the man we captured in the alley and found myself at The Gull. Draven and his men managed to corner me in the side hall and doused me in the Dragon's Bane."

I looked him up and down. "So, what does it do to you?"

He pursed his lips. "It limits my ability to change into my dragon form, and even hinders my human strength. To try to change into my dragon form takes a great effort, and to remain in that form for any amount of time-well-" His saddened eyes fell on me. "You experienced that pain."

I winced. "Yeah..."

"The effects will wear off in a few hours," Mia assured him.

Luca nodded. "Yes, but in that time the sun will have set and Pond King will have made his entrance into the city. No doubt he works toward that aim as we speak."

"So, what happens if he breaks out?" Pennae spoke up.

I caught her eye and shook my head. “Nothing good. He makes a new entrance, and the city gets their water contaminated.”

Pennae wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t it already dirty with all those dwarves down there?”

“The sealed gate keeps anyone from tampering with the city water supply, either through magical means or other more conventional efforts,” Mia explained to her.

I looked up at Luca whose furrowed brow showed his concern. “So where do you think the key is?”

“On their ship in the port,” he revealed as he looked at one of the nearby holes in the floor. “And I believe these tunnels lead to the port.”

Mia blinked at him. “The whole five miles? How can someone dig such a trench over that distance without anyone noticing?”

Luca folded his arms and frowned. “I’m not sure, but the smells down there suggest there is a connection between this path and the port.”

My eyes widened. “The saltwater scent!”

He nodded. “Just that.”

Pennae leaned over the edge of the hole and winced. “That doesn’t look very safe.”

Luca turned to her. “It isn’t, and it would be best if I go alone.”

I clasped Pennae’s hands in my own and smiled at her. “Thank you for all your help. I couldn’t have gotten this far without you.” Her beaming face was my reply as she nodded and stepped back out of my reach.

Ethan clapped a hand on his sister’s shoulder and jerked his head toward the entrance. “If you guys are done with me, I think I’ll be going with this beautiful, feathered siren.” A slight blush touched Pennae’s cheeks.

Mia pursed her lips but nodded. “Thank you for the help.”

A grin stretched across his lips. “It’s been a long time since you thanked me.”

She returned his smile with one of her own. “Try not to make it such a long stretch next time.”

He backed up and shrugged. “I can’t make any promises.” He turned toward the door but paused and looked over his shoulder. “And Mia?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Don’t get yourself killed down there.”

She grinned. “I can’t make any promises.”

He rolled his eyes, but a smile danced across his lips. "Touché."

"It would be better if you join your brother and Pennae," Luca spoke up as he turned to me and grasped my hands in his own. "And I would prefer you go with them."

I frowned at him. "And leave you to do this all alone?"

He nodded. "It would be safer for you."

I snorted and patted my chest over my heart. "Well, according to practically everybody I'm already connected to you, so if you go, I go. Literally and figuratively."

He pursed his lips and bowed his head slightly. "I'm sorry. I should have told you the whole truth."

I offered him a teasing smile. "You'll have plenty of time to do that later because I'm coming with you to make sure you don't get captured again."

Mia stepped forward. "Then I'm coming with you."

Pennae raised her feathered hand. "And me!"

Luca shook his head. "This is too dangerous, and two people would be easier to hide from our foes than four."

Ethan draped his arms over those of the two women and gave them a lopsided grin. "You heard His Highness. Time to march upstairs and drink a toast to their luck."

Mia wrinkled her nose at him. "You still smell like you drank enough for a barrel full of luck."

"Then we'll fill another one!" he proposed as he turned them toward the hall and led them out of the room.

I looked up at Luca who had raised one of his eyebrows. "You have some interesting citizens here."

He looked down at me and smiled. "I wouldn't have it any other way. Shall we?"

I leaned over the hole and down the full ten feet to the dirt floor. Beams held up the ceiling and the flames in the lanterns precariously flickered. “So, if we manage to get through this tunnel alive, how are we going to get onto a pirate ship?”

Luca slipped up to my side and looked into the hole. “If it’s anchored in the port then there’s a chance we can swim to it.”

I winced. “I, um, don’t swim very well” A familiar look slipped into his eyes, and I frowned at him, “and I’m not staying on shore while you go alone, even if I have to do a tough-love swimming lesson.”

He gave me a gentle smile. “I can see why the Fates decided to join us.”

I blinked at him. “Why?”

“Because you’re as stubborn as I am. Now then,” He stretched out his arms to me, “shall we?”

I pointed at the hole. “That’s a little deep.”

He grinned. “Let’s just say I’ll get some practice in carrying you, through water or down a hole.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “What does that-hey!” Luca had swept me into his arms and pressed me against his firm chest. I glared up at him. “Did your dad teach you to do this?”

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “My mom, actually. She was rather fond of flying. Now hold on.”

Luca leapt over the side. I clenched my teeth to stifle a yelp as wind whipped past us. He landed neatly on his feet and set me down. I now had

a clear view of Luca's former battles and couldn't help but let out a snort.

Draven and his unlucky cohort leaned against a nearby wall with their heads lolled together, sleeping like two babes. They each sported bruised lumps on their faces and stupid, lopsided grins on their lips.

The tunnels themselves were mostly straight with thick beams that stood at consistent spacing to support the ceiling. The wide underground path led past the unconscious men to a dead-end where the area opened to a large living quarters filled with cots and a table and chairs. One wall was complete rock, and a pair of broken shackles were attached to the stone. I couldn't help but notice that the place over where I'd been tapping was close to those chains.

I took a step closer, and my foot kicked something on the ground. I stooped and picked it up. The thing appeared to be a metal cannister with a spray cap. I gave the top a whiff and wrinkled my nose. "This smells like some sort of herb." The after-scent stung my nostrils. "A horrible herb."

Luca held out his hand to me. "Let me see." I passed the cannister to him and he carefully drew the cap close to his nose. He jerked it away immediately and scowled at the cannister. "Dragon's Bane."

I studied the can with newfound respect and disgust. "Where does this stuff come from?"

"A far-off island rumored to be filled with monsters concocted from the nightmares of seamen," Luca explained as he pocketed the can. "The plant itself is rare even there, and thus a king's ransom is demanded for even an ounce of the liquid drawn from the flowers that bloom only rarely."

I lifted an eyebrow. "That's a lot of trouble just to make sure you're not in the way."

He looked down the tunnel and pursed his lips. "Yes and it requires some knowledge of how to prepare the herb that is not common knowledge among pirates."

I tilted my head to one side. "Can't anybody just juice up the flower?"

He shook his head. "No, because while the juice weakens me, the flower itself is poisonous to humans and many other changeling species."

"Changeling?"

"Those with the ability to transform from a human form into that of an animal," he explained as he offered me his hand. "But I can explain just as



well on the way there. Our foes will soon know I've escaped and will be expecting us."

I accepted his hand but frowned as he led me down the tunnel. "Then how are we going to sneak aboard the ship?"

He shook his head. "I haven't figure that out yet, but one bridge at a time."

I squinted down the long corridor. "You said the port was five miles away?"

"Yes."

"Won't we be too late to get there and back?"

A pensive expression slipped onto his face. "Getting back won't be a problem with my wings, but I suspect they haven't dug the whole five miles."

I tilted my head to one side. "What does that mean?"

"It means magic."

The mention of the word brought to mind the recent discovery of our close connection. "Speaking of that, what about this connection you and I share? Are we going to feel one another's side aches and cramps, too?"

A smile touched the corners of his lips as he shook his head. "Nothing so mundane. The agony I felt because of the Dragon's Bane is a creation of magic, and thus it effects our magical bond. Anything outside of magic won't run through our connection."

I snorted. "Well, that's a relief. I was worried we were going to spread the measles to one another."

We hurried along for another hundred yards, passing through one intersection after another that veered off toward other parts of Luca's land. The soft murmur of voices quieted my own as I realized we weren't alone in the tunnels. At the end of the hundred yards, we found ourselves at a dead end.

Literally.

The corridor stopped at a wall, and chained to the wall was a skeleton. The poor fellow sat in the dust with his arms above his head and his bony wrists still stuck in his shackles. He wore the dried-out remains of his clothes, including a bandanna atop his bald white head.

Luca let go of my hand and strode forward to kneel beside the fallen fellow. He tilted his head to one side and examined the grinning face. "Interesting."

I wrapped my arms around myself and wrinkled my nose. “And a little bit creepy. Is he a warning for everyone else not to run in the halls?”

He shook his head. “It’s something a little more than that.”

I looked over my shoulder. “How far do you think we’ve come?”

“The whole length of the tunnel is less than a half mile,” he explained as he reached out and grasped the lower jaw.

I whipped my head back and my own jaw hit the floor. “What are you doing?!”

He wiggled the jaw for a moment before dropping it in favor of the closest wrist which he gave a bit of a twist. “Looking for the key to open the portal.”

I blinked at him. “You’re looking for a... skeleton key?”

Luca paused in his bone teasing to cast a look up at me. “I seem to recall stories from my mother mentioning your world had them.”

I snorted. “Yeah, but they aren’t literal skeletons.” I paused and furrowed my brow. “Your mother was from my world?”

He didn’t look at me as he answered my question. “Yes.” He nodded at the other side of the bone man. “Would you mind pulling on the wrist on the other side?”

I winced, but reluctantly slipped up to the other side of the dead man. “What exactly am I looking for?”

“A button or small mark which may indicate how to open the portal,” he explained as he turned over the fingers one at a time and inspected the joints. “Hidden portals are often opened by speaking an incantation or located on someone’s person at a spot not likely to be touched.”

My eyes invariably dropped to the pirate’s pants, or what remained of them. I caught Luca’s attention and pointed at the trousers. “Have you-um, tried between the legs?”

Luca’s eyebrows shot up, as did the corners of his lips. “That is a possibility.”

He drew back the crumbling waistband of the trousers and reached inside. I watched in horrified fascination as he rummaged around what lay in there before his eyes lit up. The next moment there was a soft click of bone against bone, and the wall behind the skeleton shifted like someone flushed a toilet. The dirt and stones were drowned into a swirling pool of darkness. I felt a slight tug on my clothes as I jumped to my feet.

The skeleton man swayed to and fro with that stupid grin on his face, as though preening himself for holding such a wonderful secret.

“Who’s opened the portal?”

The shout came from behind us. We whipped our heads around in time to see a half dozen men step out of one of the side passages.

“Hey!” shouted the leader as he stabbed a finger at us. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Luca grabbed my hand and grinned at the men. “Leaving.”

He leapt into the portal, taking me with him.

**M**y scream lagged behind us as we fell into the swirling wind and darkness. There was a moment of weightlessness followed by a hard drop through the other side. Fortunately, I fell on something soft. Unfortunately for Luca, it was him.

He let out a soft ‘oomph’ as I toppled onto him. I could see why. The floor was jagged stone smoothed only by some half-hearted chiseling and countless feet. The smell of salty air invaded my nostrils with all the tenderness of a rampaging grizzly bear.

I clambered off Luca and he climbed to his feet, where he gave me a teasing smile. “You’re lighter than you look.”

I snorted. “And you’re a terrible liar, now where are we?”

He looked ahead of us. The tunnel stretched for a hundred feet and stopped at a curtain of seaweed. A light breeze blew against the strands, making them wave at us. “I’d say we’re at Castellia, the port of my kingdom, but let’s find out.”

Luca led the way and we soon arrived at the seaweed. He drew aside half the curtain and revealed a small rocky cove with cliffs some two hundred feet tall. They occupied much of the scenery to our left, but on our right was the expanse of a great ocean, and a few hints of long, wide docks that stretched out into those green-blue waters.

We stepped out and into the full warmth of the sun and salty air. The cove wall to our left was mirrored on the far side of the five-mile wide bay by another cliff side that protected the port from the unforgiving waters of the ocean. Together they created a mile-wide mouth two miles out from

land that allowed vessels to dock within the safe confines of the stone walls. I noticed a faint white spot on the left-hand side of the mouth that appeared to be a rock discoloration from weather.

The docks did indeed stretch out from shore for some five hundred feet, and ships of all sizes and styles lined the boards. Sailors loaded and unloaded cargo, and shipments were inspected and stacked, awaiting more travel. The shouts of men and seagulls alike echoed over the rocks as commerce went on its business.

The port city itself stretched out away from the water and in the direction of Amnisis. The city was filled with houses that showed its ancient maritime heritage in their deck-board walls and exterior decorations such as old nets and traps. Yards and streets were shaded by canvas stretched over old ship masts, and the storefronts more resembled entrances to the captain's quarters than fancy shops. Commerce bustled hither and there in the form of carts loaded with goods moving up and down the cobblestone roads. On the widest central road an air of busy work swam down the stones as sailors mingled with locals to create a cacophony of laughter and hard selling.

I glanced up at Luca who was inspecting the docked boats. "That's a lot of ships."

He nodded. "Yes, but we're only looking for one." His eyes lit up as they fell on a particularly long away boat anchored on a dock not far from the rocky trail that led to where we stood. He nodded at the boat. "That one."

I squinted at the away vessel. It was made of a dark oak style wood and its bow was sharply pointed. Two rows of oars lay in their hooks awaiting their oarsmen. There was no name carved anywhere, but a small carving of a bird like a dove had been nailed to the prow.

I lifted an eyebrow. "How can you tell it's that one?"

His sharp eyes scanned the docks. "The dove is the sign of Trulio, and the ship is of the finest quality wood, a weakness he's known for."

My other eyebrow rose up. "He's that bold that he marks all his ships with his favorite bird?"

Luca sighed. "He's that cunning. Though everyone knows his reputation, proving that he's a pirate is much more difficult. None of his sailors have ever implicated him in their illegal activities, and he himself stays far away from the dirtier work of piracy."

I furrowed my brow. “Why would someone like that want to get involved with stealing a key? He hasn’t even asked for a ransom.”

Luca pursed his lips. “No, and that’s what’s so strange about this theft. It isn’t his style, nor does he have anything to gain.”

I looked around the port waters, but dozens of ships were anchored out at sea. “Well, we know where the away boat is at, but where’s its mother? And are we going to guess the key is out there and not hiding in another tunnel?”

Luca folded his arms over his chest and frowned. “I see what you mean. Any of his pirates could be holding the key.”

Something clicked in my mind. “How many women pirates does he have?”

Luca turned to me with a look of surprise. “Very few, why?”

“Because Ethan, the guy you met-”

“Eunomia’s brother.”

I paused mid-sentence with my mouth agape before I clapped it shut and blinked at him. “Who?”

The corners of Luca’s lips twitched upward. “Eunomia Smith is her full name, though those close to her call her Mia, but you were saying about her brother?”

“We saw him on the steps this morning, and I figured he’d maybe drawn the suspects going in or coming out, so I had Pennae spring me from the castle.”

Luca chuckled. “I imagine that must have greatly amused Sfetnic and greatly annoyed Tybalt.”

I blinked at him. “You mean the guy with the tall helmet?”

He nodded. “He’s my captain of the guards, and his duty is to watch over you while I’m away.”

I frowned. “How many times are you going to leave me pining for you in your castle?”

Luca’s humor failed him as he turned his face away from me and pursed his lips. “A king has a great many responsibilities, but you were explaining to me about Ethan. He had seen the two thieves?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’d drawn two people who had gone in separately but came out together. We figured they were it and he knew that Draven had a tattoo of a gull on his arm, so we followed him to The Gull and that’s where we found you.”

He turned back to me and smiled. "I couldn't have followed the trail better myself, and unfortunately," He rubbed the lower half of his face with his palm, "I didn't."

I studied his pale features with a heavy heart. "You sure you're going to be alright?"

Luca turned his attention back to the port and lifted his eyes to the sky where the sun had begun its descent. "King Glimlach has given us little choice." He shook himself and returned his gaze to me. "But what of the other person?"

"The other person was a woman, and a pretty one with an eye patch over this eye." I drew a finger over my left eye. Luca's own eyes widened, and I lifted an eyebrow. "What? Do you know her?"

He looked straight ahead and pursed his lips. "Yes. I gave her the eye patch."

My face fell. "How? Why?"

He nodded at the ocean. "It was during my training on one of my father's merchant vessels a long while ago. Pirates attacked our ship and we fended them off, though not without casualties. The captain was struck down and being the first mate, I was the next to fall under the sword of the lead pirate."

My eyebrows shot up. "The woman."

"Yes, the woman. She and I fought for a long while until I captured the upper hand by a throwing a ball of yarn, a gift of luck from my mother, under one of her feet. She stumbled and I found my chance."

I blinked at him. "Your mother gave you a lucky ball of yarn?"

A smile touched his lips. "She was an incredibly complex lady, but the ball had come from her own home, and she considered it lucky." The humor fled as he sighed. "That day it was lucky, and with their captain grievously wounded the pirates retreated. The woman cursed me not to step foot on the ocean again."

I winced. "Wow. She's not going to like to see you again."

He shook his head. "No, but see her we must if we're to retrieve the key. Now then," Held out his hand to me, "shall we?"

I shrugged and set my hand in his. "Why not? I've come this far."

Luca led me along the narrow rocky path that jutted out only two feet from the rough cliff face. The trail opened onto a sandy beach below the docks, and we ducked low to avoid any unwanted attention from the shore.

Some of the docks stood taller than me while others were hardly two feet above the water. The away vessel was anchored at one of the shorter docks, and we were forced to scurry onto the wood planks. A few people lounged about on their own boats and or leaned against a few scattered boxes, their bandannas over their eyes as they slept below the bright sun. We tiptoed past them and up to the docked vessel.

Luca stepped into the boat and offered me his hand. I bit my lower lip as my eyes invariably fell on the deep water around the vessel. "I did tell you I can't swim, right?"

He met my eyes and smiled. "This vessel is well-made, and I can swim for both of us."

I took a deep breath and set my hand in his. Luca eased me into the boat. The away ship rocked to and fro, and I clung to him as images of my wet and imminent demise flashed through my mind.

Luca brushed a hand over the top of my head and his whispered words floated down to me. "I will never let any harm come to you. This I swear on the graves of my forefathers."

I snorted. "When we get back to the city, I expect proof of these graves."

He chuckled as he seated me on the middle bench between a set of oars. "That can be arranged."

I grasped one of the heavy-looking oars and found that I needed two hands to lift it out of its resting place. "How are we going to get this thing going?"

"We aren't. You will."

My jaw dropped onto the bottom of the boat. "Me? I can't move this!"

He smiled at me as he knelt in front of me. "You're stronger than you know, especially with this." He reached into his jacket and drew out a vial of some dark red liquid. Luca popped the cork and held it out to me. "Drink all of it."

I took the vial and gave the contents a whiff before I wrinkled my nose. "It smells like blood."

"That's because it's mine."



For the second time in one minute my jaw hit the bottom of the boat hull. “You want me to do what?”

He pressed a finger to his lips and his eyes darted over to the sleeping men. “The docks have ears.”

I clapped my jaw shut and shoved the vial back in his hand as I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Listen, I know we have some sort of connection, but this is taking it too far. Besides, how’s your blood going to help me get this boat moving?”

His eyes fell on the liquid in the vial as he twisted the glass in his hand. “My blood has certain... unique properties that when drank instills within anyone greater strength and speed.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “How come more people haven’t hired a vampire and gone after your blood?”

“The effects last for only a short time, and for some people they can be deadly.”

A little bit of color left my face. “Is there a drug test I can take to make sure I’m not one of those people?”

Luca met my eyes with his steady gaze. “Our connection ensures that I can never harm you.”

I pursed my lips but held out my hand. “Fork it over.” He blinked at me, and I snorted. “Give it to me.”

A smile spread across his lips as he handed me the vial. I took the glass and, pinching my nose shut and taking a deep breath, downed the

whole contents in one big, rust-flavored gulp. Luca took the vial back and I tried to keep down the vile vial contents.

After a moment I wrinkled my nose. “So, what-” I felt like something socked me in the gut, but in a gentle way, like they’d used a brick full of pillows.

I wrapped my arms around myself and doubled over as the unusual feeling spread all over my body. My muscles tightened and a few in my hand visibly danced.

Luca dropped to one knee in front of me and grasped my shoulders. “This will pass.”

After a moment I let out a stifled gasp. That was the release mechanism, and the pain faded. A strange feeling of weightlessness replaced it. I lifted my hand and studied it as though for the first time. There was hardly any weight to it at all, almost like I was a ghost.

“Now take up the oars,” Luca instructed as he slipped back into the stern and grabbed the rudder handle in one hand.

I grabbed one of the oars and lifted it with both hands. The wood nearly flew out of my grasp and into the drink. I gawked at the wood a moment before I whipped my head to my grinning companion. “That is so cool.”

He chuckled. “I don’t need a translator to understand that word, but we should get going.”

Luca untied the boat, and I grabbed the oars. He gave a push against the dock and shoved us away from the wood. I dipped the tips of the oars into the water and rowed. The boat cut through the water like a hot knife through butter.

We were soon far from the dock and in the midst of the large, anchored vessels that dotted the deeper port waters. I looked about myself. “Which one are we aiming for?”

He nodded at a point in front of us. “That ship.”

I twisted around while still rowing and noted the white color I’d noticed before. The ‘color,’ however, was a thick mist that clung to the cliff walls to the left of the port mouth. The mist covered some four hundred feet of the stone wall from the water to the top of the jagged gray rocks and appeared to stretch out three hundred feet from those same walls. The white fog drifted lazily to and fro, but never moved more than a few feet.

I furrowed my brow. "What is it?"

"A hide called the Shroud. The vessel we seek is within that fog bank."

I snorted. "That's kind of an obvious hide."

Luca shook his head. "Not with that hide. The fog there is permanent, a remnant of the wars my kingdom has fought."

I turned to him and lifted an eyebrow as I kept up my rowing. "So why don't the port officials make sure nobody hides in there?"

He pursed his lips as he swept his eyes over the mist. "Because sea monsters are attracted to the magic that created and keeps the mist."

"Was the mist made to protect the port?"

Luca sighed. "On the contrary, it was meant to destroy any ships that attempted to navigate through the mouth. In that time there were more rocks at the mouth, remnants of when the cliffs extended out even farther than they do now. Our enemies created a fog bank to stifle our trade and force us to surrender."

I lifted an eyebrow. "So, what happened?"

"One of my ancestors, those of the Luminare branch of my line—"

"The ones who can do magic really well, like Cassius?" I recalled.

He nodded. "Yes. They dispelled much of the fog, and what you see before us is all that remains of that long-ago contest of wills."

"Your country has a really strange history."

A wry smile slipped onto his lips. "A country as old as mine tends to have its share of oddities."

I leaned to my left and looked into the deep, dark water. "So, what's going to keep us from being swallowed by a sea monster?"

"Dumb luck."

I whipped my head up and blinked at him. "You're joking."

"No."

Nothing like the threat of imminent death by sea monster to get the blood going and the oars rowing. The vessel practically flew through the water, and after a few tense minutes I risked a look over my shoulder to see how much of the two-mile breadth we'd covered. It turned out my prodigious strength had nearly taken us to the edge of the fog.

The next moment I heard a splash and whipped my head back around. Luca had vanished, but his flailing arms soon appeared above the hull of the boat. I dropped my oars and leapt across the short ship to the stern

where I grabbed one of his flailing limbs. His head was above water, but it was what was below it that made my blood run cold.

A hulking shadow swam just below the surface. Something shot out of the water and splattered me with salt water. I leaned my head back and gaped at the long, shell-covered arm that stretched above me. The limb ended in fingers that resembled crab claws, but with sharp, dagger-like points on the end.

The rest of the monster came with it, and I nearly let go of Luca as I beheld a beast with the shape of a man, but twice as large. Its hairless body was covered in turtle shell-like plates, and its head was smooth with a stretched face and flat nose only a mother could love, if the mother didn't eat her offspring. Its mouth was shriveled like an old man without teeth, and its deep-set eyes were completely black.

The creature lifted its other arm out of the water and revealed its hold on the lower part of Luca's leg. It leaned its empty arm atop the side of the boat and hung Luca upside down on its side, but I kept my hold on his arm with both hands.

I gave a yank, but Luca remained trapped in its hold. "Let him go!"

The creature chuckled. It was like listening to someone beat a large drum. "I do not seek to harm him."

I gave a tug on Luca's arm. "Then let him go!"

"It's alright," Luca told me as he offered me an upside down smile. "Mizu is an old friend."

I looked Luca up and down. "Do your friends often leave you hanging?"

Mizu gave another chuckle as he set Luca back in his seat, and I scuttled back to make room for the dripping dragon lord. "I must apologize, but I thought only to help my friend."

I watched as Luca removed his shirt and rung it out over the side of the boat. "By dragging him into the water?"

Luca set his shirt aside and I couldn't help but admire the rippling muscles. He glanced at me, and I whipped my face away, but not before I caught him giving me a sly smile.

Luca pulled off a few bits of tangled seaweed from his clothes. "Mizu is a kaiso, a friendly creature of the oceans."

Mizu bowed his head to me. "It is a great honor to meet the Lady of White Fire."

Luca paused in his cleaning and lifted an eyebrow at him. “The news in the ocean travels quickly.”

Mizu swept an arm over the mouth of the bay. “The gulls crying on the rocks told me.”

I raised my arm. “If you don’t mind my asking, but why did you decide to give Luca a bath?”

Mizu’s taut face took on an expression of concern as he turned his head to Luca. “A mere reminder that he has been forbidden from entering the ocean.”

Luca slipped back on his wrinkled shirt. “I was going to keep to the bay.”

The sea creature shook his head. “You take a great risk.”

Luca pursed his lips. “Because there’s a great risk of failure if we don’t get something back from some pirates. Can you tell us if there’s a ship at harbor in the Shroud?”

Mizu nodded. “There is, and I will help you reach it.”

Mizu swam past us, and I took up the oars and followed behind him. The air grew colder the closer we came to the Shroud, and I heard an odd creaking noise, like wood and rope swaying in the wind. I caught Luca's eyes, but he pressed a finger to his lips and shook his head. That confirmed my suspicions. We were nearing a vessel, and it was likely to be the pirate one we sought.

I slowed my rowing efforts and we drifted on the tide. We glided into the mist, and I felt a slight rocking. I leaned to one side and glimpsed Mizu's wet, clawed hand clasping the side of the vessel and dragging the boat forward. All was quiet for the longest time until the mist began to part. My body tensed, expecting an impact with the cliffs, but the only impact came upon my ears.

The sounds of soft voices floated to my ears and Mizu stopped the boat. I squinted into the white shadows and glimpsed the outline of a massive vessel. Three masts towered above the deck, and that itself was some forty feet above the water. The sails were tied to their booms, but they slightly flapped in the light breeze that glided past us. Shadows walked the deck, and more than one of them stood watch at the three-foot tall wooden wall that surrounded the deck.

Mizu swam close between Luca and me and lowered his voice to a whisper. "They appear to be expecting you."

Luca nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised if they left this ship at the dock for our use."

I whipped my head to him and frowned. “Then what are we doing taking the bait?”

“We needed a way to the ship,” he reminded me as he studied the giant hull of the vessel. He nodded at something brown that leaned against the boards. “That doesn’t mean we have to accept their invitation aboard, at least not via the rope ladder they’ve conveniently set down for us.”

I examined where he indicated and noticed the aforementioned ladder. “So how do we get aboard without them noticing us?”

Luca furrowed his brow as he continued his perusal of the deck and the many shadow shapes of men. “I have no idea.”

“Might I suggest a way?” Mizu spoke up as he pointed to the stern. “There appears to be a-what do you call them? Window? Open at the rear.”

I wrinkled my nose. “That sounds like a trap.”

Luca lifted his eyes to me and smiled. “A woman’s intuition?”

I wrapped my arms around myself and shivered. “No, the temperature. It’s freezing out here.” The damp air did indeed leave a cold chill on my bones.

Luca nodded. “Yes, but it appears we have no choice.

I sighed as I took up the oars. “Well, at least a trap in the captain’s quarters will be warmer than one on deck.”

“I will take you there,” Mizu offered as he drew the boat onward.

We followed the tall hull and soon Mizu drew us close to the stern. The captain’s quarters some thirty feet above our heads sported a long row of ornate paned windows, one of which stood open.

Luca grabbed a rope that lay in the bottom of our boat and tied one end to a square rock which acted as an anchor. He held out the setup to me while keeping the untied end of the rope to himself. “Right now, you have greater strength than I do. You need to throw the rock through the window and pin it against the interior portion of the wall so we can climb the rope.

I eyed the setup and winced. “I might have your strength, but probably not your aim.”

He smiled. “I have faith that you can do it.”

I pursed my lips but took the anchor and rope in hand. The rock was as light as a baseball and the heavy twined rope a mere feather. I rose to my unsteady feet and focused my attention on the open window. The open pane gave me about two feet through which to throw the rock.

I took a deep breath and tossed the rock. It flew straight up into the air, missing the window completely, and careened back toward us. Luca caught the rock in his arms before the stone plunged through the bottom of the boat and plunged us to the bottom of the port. He looked at me with a raised brow and a teasing smile.

I sheepishly grinned at him and shrugged. “No aim.”

“Try again,” he insisted as he handed me back the rock.

I sighed but steadied myself and focused all my attention on the open window. The weight of the stone was more familiar to me now, so I stiffened my jaw and gave another toss. The rope and rock flew up and arched into the window.

Luca grabbed the rope and pulled it to prevent a hard knock of the stone against the floor. I heard a soft thump as the stone struck the wall. Luca tugged on the rope and the strands failed to come down.

He looked to me and his good humor fell away. “Would it be any use to tell you to stay here?”

I grabbed part of the rope and shook my head. “Nope.”

“Then at least allow me to go first.”

Mizu floated close beside our boat. “This is quite reckless, even for you.”

Luca flashed him a sly grin. “No reward without risk, but if we don’t come out by an hour before sunset then try to alert the castle of our disappearance.”

Mizu nodded. “Very well. Good fortune, my friends, and stay safe.” He bowed his head to us before he disappeared beneath the water.

Luca gave another tug on the ropes before he leapt up. He planted his feet firmly against the boards that made up the stern and stared at me at a ninety degree angle. “Follow my lead, and don’t look down.”

“Why does someone always have to say that?” I muttered to myself as I joined him on the rope.

The going wasn’t easy, but in a few minutes, Luca slipped through the window and popped his head back out. He took my hand and pulled me inside. The cabin was covered in shadows, but I could make out heavy furniture and the doors on the opposite side from where we’d entered.

A booming voice broke the silence. “What have we here?”

Lamps were lit and the room illuminated to reveal a half dozen pirates positioned throughout the room. One of them was seated at a high-back



chair behind a large oak desk. The man was about forty with a short black beard and dark hair. He wore a baggy shirt and pants, and a sash was draped over one shoulder and looped back around at his waist.

He leaned back and twined his fingers together as he studied us with dark eyes and a bemused smile. "You must be commended. You're the first stowaways I've had in a decade."

I winced. "And you let the last ones go, right?"

His attention fell on me, and he lifted an eyebrow. "You are rather bold, but I wouldn't expect any less from the new queen of Amnisis."

I shrugged. "I'm just being me, but who are you?"

He stood and crossed his arm over his chest as he bowed low to us. "My apologies for not introducing myself. I am Raziel Trulio, owner of this fine vessel and merchant of the seas."

"We were wondering about your other trade," Luca spoke up.

Trulio straightened and gave Luca a sharp look but didn't lose his smile. "Whatever do you mean?"

Luca studied him with his own penetrating gaze. "I'm sure you've heard the key to the gate has been stolen."

He chuckled. "And let me guess, you believe I have something to do with the theft?"

Luca's eyes darted over the room. "We have witnesses that will swear they saw your men being at the museum prior to the theft."

Trulio folded his arms and furrowed his brow in faux thought. "My men? I don't recall my ordering them to be near that illustrious place."

Luca shook his head. "Your half-truths won't work this time, Trulio. Draven and Reshma were spotted there."

The man lifted an eyebrow. "Were they? By whom?"

"Then you don't deny they were there?"

Trulio sat back down and crossed his legs one over the other. He set a hand on his knee and sighed. "Why do you always suspect me, Luca? We are such old and dear friends."

A smile slipped onto Luca's lips. "It's because we're such old acquaintances that I believe you're the only one willing to take on such a job as this. Who paid you and where is the key?"

Trulio shook his head. "I'm afraid your commands mean nothing on this ship. This is the sea where your rules don't apply."

Luca's eyebrows crashed down. "The port of Castellia is under the jurisdiction of Amnisis."

"That I do not contest. However," Trulio gestured to the window behind us, "look for yourself."

Luca and I spun around to face the open window. The last of the mist floated past as the ship broke free of the white air. The edge of the cliff came into view.

The ship was leaving port, and it was taking us with it.

Luca spun back around to glare at Trulio. “You dare to kidnap the king of Amnisis?”

Trulio chuckled. “My dear Luca, now is as good a time as any. I am well aware that you are as weak as a kitten. Now then-” He stood, and his dark eyes darted between Luca and me. “What shall I do with my guests. Men?”

“A moment before you pass judgment on us,” Luca spoke up as he gathered himself and stared at Trulio through narrowed eyes. “Why do you seek to capture my queen?”

Trulio lifted an eyebrow. “Whatever do you mean, Your Highness?”

Luca gestured to me. “I’m referring to your attempt to kidnap my queen on the streets of Amnisis earlier this day. What does your buyer want her for?”

Trulio laughed. “My dear Luca, even if I deigned to pry into the motives of my clients, this time you have the wrong merchant. I have no interest in your queen other than to admire her beauty, and it was certainly not one of my men who attempted to abduct her. Besides, surely you know I don’t go into the kidnapping business.”

I looked over my shoulder and snorted at the passing scenery. “Could’ve fooled me.”

He smiled and swept his arm over the motley crew that surrounded us. “This is merely an amusement for my men. After all, you did sneak aboard my vessel, and the law of the sea states that any such boarding is considered piracy.”

“Then how do you explain this?” Luca reached into his pocket and drew out the bandanna he’d taken from the singed pirate. He tossed the cloth onto the desk.

Trulio studied the cloth for a moment before he frowned. “Where did you get that?”

“From one who tried to kidnap my queen. An incineration spell destroyed the rest of him.”

The pirate leader wrinkled his nose. “I know nothing of this attack, but I will certainly look into the matter when I have the time. Now then,” He returned his attention to the crew, “what shall we do with this boarding party?”

“Hang ‘em!”

“Cut their throats!”

Trulio folded his arms and closed his eyes as he shook his head. “What unoriginal proposals, and so messy.”

The doors swung open, and a figure cast in shadow stood in the doorway. “Let us throw them overboard.”

All eyes fell on the figure, and I couldn’t help but notice Luca’s own eyes narrowed. The figure stepped into the room, and I recognize the one-eyed face of the woman whom Luca had called Reshma. She wore a tight-fitting purple blouse with black pants and knee-high boots, all of which showed off her impressive figure. The woman sported two pistols, one on either hip and a knife handle stuck out of one boot. Her golden locks cascaded down over her shoulders and framed her like that of an angel, but the dark look in her eye told another story.

Trulio smiled as the woman strode up to the side of the desk and continued to glare at Luca. “A rather bland suggestion, but I suppose with your curse the effects could be... interesting.”

She kept her focus on Luca as she crossed her arms over her large chest. “I hope so.”

A smile spread across Luca’s lips as he slipped behind me. “You’re about to find out, but first might we have that key? As a parting gift.”

Trulio sighed. “Do you still beat at that drum? Surely you understand that even if I had stolen the key, I would not hold such a dangerously valued item aboard my ship.”

Luca set his hands on my shoulders and grinned at Trulio. “I see. In that case, I think we’ll be going.”

Some of Trulio's good humor slipped away as he lifted an eyebrow. "A bold statement for someone who's trapped with only the sea as their escape."

Luca chuckled as he wrapped his arms around my waist and drew me close against his chest. "The sea IS my escape."

A strange tingle ran from his arms and into my body. The next moment we were violently tugged backward and off the floor. Luca kicked up my legs and at the same time drew in his legs. We flew past the astonished pirates and out the window. The beautiful dark ocean rippled beneath us as we sailed over the deep water. The mouth of the port was only a few feet away, and we made splashdown into the chilly port waters.

Panic overtook my mind as I thrashed about, but Luca looped my arms around his neck and kept us buoyant. His soothing voice reached me through my alarm. "I have you. Just hold on."

I clung to him like a drowning-well, me. Luca kicked his legs and pumped his arms, and he cut through the water like a fish. We hadn't tied the away vessel, and the tide had floated the boat free of the mist and closer to land. Luca helped me into the vessel before he climbed in and collapsed beside me.

We both lay on our backs, soaking wet and breathing hard. I rolled my head to face him. "What... the hell... just happened?"

He grinned back at me. "My 'curse.' Reshma forbade me from stepping foot on the open sea, so whenever I make the attempt, the curse draws me out of the domain of the sea." He closed his eyes and sighed. "I must admit I would never have expected the curse to be a blessing."

I sat up and looked out on the mouth of the port. The white sails of the ship were disappearing into the horizon. My heart fell. "What about the key?"

Luca scrunched up his face in thought. "Drum..."

I twisted around and blinked at him. "Come again?"

"Trulio mentioned a drum," Luca mused as he sat up and draped one arm over a bench. "And he isn't a man who wastes his words."

I frowned. "So what was he trying to say?"

He lifted himself onto the bench and offered me a hand. "That we may find the key hidden in something to do with a drum."

I took the hand and he pulled me onto the wood beside him. "But why would he want us to find the key?"

Luca smiled. “No doubt he’s received his pay and no longer has any need nor desire to hold on to the key, especially as hurting Amnisis would hurt his more honest trading ventures. There is also the matter of the bandanna. He appeared to be genuinely surprised by its presentation, and Trulio is not a man who likes surprises, especially those that insinuate him into such an obviously clumsy crime as what happened to you earlier.”

“But that means we still don’t know who hired him, or where the key is hidden,” I pointed out as I lifted my eyes to the sky. The sun told me there were only a few more hours of daylight left, and then the dwarf king would make his new entrance.

“Not quite,” he mused as a thoughtful expression appeared on his face. “What better place would a thing be hidden if not on yourself?”

I furrowed my brow before an idea struck me. “Where you found it!”

He smiled and nodded. “Yes. The item may very well still be in the museum, hidden somewhere among the other relics. We should return to the museum and see what we can find.”

I looked him up and down. “Can you fly us back, or do we have return tickets through the creepy portal bus?”

Luca grinned before he plopped himself on the bench in the middle of the boat. He took up the oars and winked at me. “Hold on.”

He dipped the oars into the water and gave a great push. The boat propelled forward. I yelped and grasped the board as the bow of the away craft cut through the waters. A few bits of sea foam sprayed over us as we neared the port docks.

In a few short minutes, in a trip that had taken me twice as long, we had arrived. Luca docked and tied the boat to the pier. He climbed out before he offered me his hand. As he pulled me out, I tripped over the boards of the dock and fell against him.

I sheepishly looked up at him, but my silliness caught in my throat. There was a strange look in his eyes. It reminded me of the time in the alley behind the pub. We’d been so close then, and there’d been that strange spark between us. For the first time since I’d dropped into this new world I saw that spark, and it both excited and terrified me.

Luca looked away, and the spell was broken. “We should hurry back to the museum. Mia might know something about this drum in their collections.”

I shook off the strange, erotic feeling and looked in the direction of the city. “So, we fly?”

Luca’s wings burst out of his back, and he grinned. “We fly.”

He swept me into his arms and leapt into the air. I was better prepared this time for the terrifying exhilaration and made sure to wrap my arms around his neck. A seawater-tinged breeze swept past us, but we soon left behind the large port city and followed the road that connected the two halves of Luca’s kingdom.

The road was made of cobblestones and stretched four carts-wide in a straight direction from one city to the other. Stone walls some twenty feet tall and nearly as thick rose up on both sides and protected the vital infrastructure from both directions. Beyond the walls were large swaths of farmland that stretched from the rocky coast to the foothills of the mountains that also abutted the city. Fields of green, yellow, and even purple passed below us, and small, whitewashed farmhouses dotted the landscape.

I caught Luca’s eyes and pointed at the heavy fortifications. “How old are those walls?”

“Roughly a thousand years, back when the kingdom fell into a trading dispute with one of our neighbors.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Has there ever been a time when someone wasn’t trying to attack your kingdom?”

He stared ahead and pursed his lips. “Unfortunately, peace is won through war, and in the annals of my kingdom those gentle years are few and far between.”

I furrowed my brow. “So, you guys have always been attacked, or were you the ones doing the attacking?”

He shook his head. “A little bit of both, I’m afraid. Not all of my ancestors who sat upon the throne have been just, and some were cruel.”

I winced. “And what happened to them?”

“Often one of the other lines of the family ousted them, or their own child did the duty for the good of the kingdom.”

“That’s...” I couldn’t think of the right words.

A bittersweet smile slipped onto his lips. “Such is the way of the world, especially for a kingdom as old as mine.”

I grinned at him with more humor than I felt. “But it has a good king now, right?”

He chuckled. "I appreciate your words, and I try my best to be the king my good people need."

A thought struck me that forced a pensive expression on my face. "And I'm supposed to be its queen..."

He continued to stare ahead, but I had a feeling his full attention lay on me. "If you desire."

I snorted. "I can't exactly go back, right?"

The corners of his lips turned downward. "No."

I folded my arms over my chest and shrugged. "Then I may as well stay. How hard could this queen business be?"

Oh boy.



We flew over the majestic countryside, and I soon glimpsed the walls of Amnisis. This was my first view of the front, and I couldn't help but admire its beauty. The large walls that ran from the port parted a half mile from the city entrance and lowered to only ten feet before they wrapped around a large circle set before the gates. In the center stood an elegant fountain of pure marble with a beautiful woman at the top. She held an amphora, and from the mouth poured fresh water from which many a traveler drank. There was even an overflow to one side for their animals.

The pair of gates of the city stood thirty feet tall, and the elegant grain showed the wood had been hewn from a single massive tree. An edifice of marble stone supported the gates, and a mass of humanity, and many changeling species, poured in and out of the entrance. We flew over the gate and the way opened into a massive square with rows upon rows of vendor tents and booths.

I gaped at all those people I saw that made up a number which I couldn't even begin to guess. "How many people live in Amnisis?"

A sparkle of pride struck his eyes as he swept his gaze over the multitudes below us. "Because of the many travelers and merchants there's no official count, but my ministers have guessed there to be about a half million people who call the city their home."

I couldn't help but whistle. Though the number paled in comparison to many cities around my world, I couldn't help but admire that many people being packed into a medieval-style metropolis.

As I studied the intricate, winding streets my memory wandered back to earlier in the day. I looked up at Luca. “Do you think Trulio was telling the truth about not trying to kidnap me?”

He furrowed his brow. “I’m not sure. He certainly had no advantage in denying the accusation, and if he would have wanted to keep you, he would have been more keen on separating us.”

I winced. “Then that might mean Trulio’s client has somebody else working for him?”

Luca pursed his lips and pressed me closer against his chest. “Yes, and they may not have given up on their efforts to kidnap you. We must keep vigilant and return you to the castle.” I leaned back and lifted an eyebrow at him. He noticed my look out of the corner of his eyes and frowned. “What?”

“You’re not taking me back right now?”

“Should I?”

I shrugged. “I just thought that’s usually what happens. The damsel gets dropped off again and the dragon king goes off to handle the crises on his own.”

Luca turned his head slightly away from me as he continued to fly us over the city and toward the museum. “There are certain... complications that prevent me from doing so.”

I blinked at him. “Like what?”

“Like we’re nearly there,” he mused as he flew us down into the museum courtyard.

Luca set me back on my feet and turned his attention to the people around us. The hour was later than past visits, making the museum and its courtyard more crowded than before. Through the open doors I could see people mill about the entrance hall, gaping and admiring the many displays.

Many of the museum goers gawked at Luca as his wings disappeared into his back. He took my hand and drew me close to him as he meandered us through the visitors. We were greeted just inside the hall by Mia.

She inclined her head to us. “It’s a great pleasure to see you again, Your Highness. What can I do for you?”

Luca nodded at the door behind the desk. “We need a moment in your office.”

She kept her official smile on her face as she turned and led us into the office. The expression slipped away the moment the door shut behind us. She turned and took a seat on the edge of her desk. “What’s happened?”

Luca recounted to her our port adventure, and when he finished there was a gloom over the small room. “Trulio hinted that the key’s location had something to do with a drum.”

Mia folded her arms and furrowed her brow before she shook her head. “I’m not familiar with any particular drum, though obviously we have a large collection of ceremonial war drums. As for the key still being hidden somewhere in the museum, I dearly hope that isn’t true.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Why is that?”

She pursed her lips. “Because there are countless spots in which to hide such a small item. It would take my entire staff days to search everything.”

Luca took my hand and nodded. “We’ll go check out the drums and perhaps a thorough search by your staff won’t be necessary. Is the exhibit still in the east wing?”

She used a hand to gesture down that particular hall. “Yes, in the green room.” Luca inclined his head as he took my hand and turned us away. “Luca.” We paused in the doorway and half-turned back to our compatriot. She slid off the edge of her desk and her gaze flitted over Luca’s face before settling on me. “You shouldn’t be together, you know.”

He nodded. “I know, but we have little choice. She needs the protection.”

A worried expression settled onto her face. “I know this isn’t my place, but the guards are well-equipped to handle protecting your queen.”

Luca turned his face away from me, but one side could still be seen by Mia. When he spoke his voice held a slight growl to the words. “There won’t be a problem.”

Mia’s eyebrows crashed down. “There already is.”

Luca slightly tightened his grip on my hand. “I can handle this. Thanks for the help.”

He pulled me out of the room, but I caught one last glimpse of Mia. She still had that worried look on her face. That made me worried.

Luca navigated us through the crowds and down the hall of the eastern wing. The wing mirrored the western one with large windows on one side and rooms on the left. The visitors milled about admiring tapestries,

paintings, and statues that littered the hall. The rooms were an eclectic mix of old and older materials. I glimpsed ancient weapons with stained tips and old carts that sported wheels worn down by countless generations of owners. There was even a strange trident that looked like Zeus would have wielded it, except the bottom of the zig-zag staff had a strange small ball attached to its base.

The hall we wanted lay at the far end. We stepped into the large space, and I found myself surrounded by every musical instrument imaginable, and some that were completely foreign to me. There were guitars, flutes, and even a small piano, but some xylophones had been created in the shape of tear drops and there was one that appeared to be made out of bones. Human bones.

The crowds that occupied the other parts of the museum hadn't yet reached our location, so we were alone. Luca led us to a group of glass cases which held drums of every size and make. Some were simple leather stretched over wood, and others were cloth over metal bands. He reluctantly released my hand and examined the contents.

"There must be something here..." he murmured to himself as moved down the long, narrow case.

I recalled that I'd only seen the pillowed outline of the object we were now searching for. "What does this key look like exactly?"

"Its appearance is very close to that of a seashell," he explained as he stopped at a particularly large drum and attempted to scrutinize its interior. "The colors, however, are brown and green to signify the union of the dwarves and my family."

I lifted an eyebrow. "How does that fit into a lock?"

He paused in his perusal and smiled at me. "It's a rather unique lock." He returned his attention to the case and frowned as he tapped the glass. "Much like the ones that contain these objects."

"I thought you might ask." We whipped our head around to find Mia strolling into the room. She held a key in her hand, but it wasn't like any key I'd seen. The teeth were half the length of the long stem, and at their ends were tiny bulbs. She stopped in front of us and held the key out to Luca. "In your haste you forgot to ask for the key to the display cases."

Luca smiled as he accepted the key from her. "My apologies. My mind was unfocused."

She cast a wry look at his body below the belt. “I don’t believe it is your mind that has your focus.”

Luca turned away from her and back to the case. He held the key in his open palm and scrunched his face up in thought. “I have things under control.”

Mia sighed and set a hand on his shoulder. “Your Highness-Luca... I’ve known you a great many years, and in all that time you have failed to lie properly to me.”

A crooked smile slipped onto his lips as he closed his fingers around the key. “Once the search is over then things will be as they should be.”

Mia pursed her lips. “Then I hope you find what you’re looking for, and soon.”

I raised my hand. “I have a feeling I’m involved in this conversation without being involved in this conversation.”

Mia turned to me with her own smile and clasped her hands in front of herself. “There are certain... proprieties that should be taken when a new queen arrives in the city. However,” She cast a look over her shoulder at Luca who studied the key with an intensity strong enough to melt the metal. “I believe I will leave that to His Highness to explain to you.” She slipped away and left us alone.

I turned to Luca who still stared at the key and lifted an eyebrow. “Well?”

“We had better get this case open,” was his only reply as he held the key up to the top front edge of the glass case.

My mouth hit the shiny floor as the pods at the end of the teeth opened and out slithered a half dozen little tentacles. Half of the tiny, handless arms slithered underneath the lid and pried apart the two pieces of glass. A faint bit of purple dust puffed out, but the spare tentacles wrapped their bodies around the colored air and absorbed the mist.

The tendrils opened a tiny gap between the lid and the wall, and with the mist all sucked up they retreated back into the key. Luca pocketed the key and wiggled his fingers into the newly formed gap.

I pointed at the key as he pocketed it. “What the hell was that?”

A sly smile slipped onto his lips as he opened the lid. “An enchanted key, much like what we’re looking for.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and frowned at him. “Alright, that’s enough.”

He paused in his search and lifted an eyebrow at me. “Come again?”

I glared back at him. “You’ve done everything in your power to avoid me since we got here. Does it have something to do with these new-queen proprieties Mia talked about?”

He returned his full attention to the drum sets laid out before us. “We have little time to discuss such matters until the key is found.”

I grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him around to face me. “I know that, but if we’re going to be working together to find it, then you’re going to have to be upfront with me.”

Uncertainty flashed across his eyes before his shoulders sagged a little and he sighed. “There are certain... complications in your being my queen. Our union, for one.”

I shrugged. “I already know about the heart thing, but this is something different, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s” He paused and ran a hand through his hair. “There are circumstances outside both of our controls. Fate has joined us together in intricate and intimate ways that force a more... feral side to surface.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Could you skip the riddles and just get to the point?”

Luca half-turned back to the drums and turned each of them upside down one at a time. Nothing tumbled out. “My dragon side desires to mate with you until you bear me children.”

I had just picked my jaw off the floor when it decided to drop back down. Luca didn’t acknowledge my shock as he picked up one drum after another, inspecting them for a moment before moving on to the next. He had finished his perusal by the time I gathered myself.

Luca closed the case lid and shook his head. “The key isn’t here, but we have other cases to search. We should get to that.” He turned away from me and strode toward the next case.

“Wait a sec!” I protested as I grabbed his wrist.

Luca froze and I felt a tremor run through his body. My heart dropped into my stomach as he slowly turned his head around to face me. The look in his heated eyes told me everything. I stumbled back and he caught my arms. His touch ignited an unfamiliar and sensual fire within me. My lips parted as a shallow breath left me.

Luca narrowed his eyes at me, and I noticed that a bright emerald color swirled in their depths. He whipped his face away and shut his eyes before he clenched his teeth. I was filled with regret when he reluctantly opened his hands and dropped his arms to his sides.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and opened his eyes, but he didn’t meet my wide-eyed stare. “I’m sorry. I never wanted you to fear me.”

My heart fell a little at the sorrow in his voice. I rallied myself and managed a shaky smile. “I wasn’t scared.”

A wry smile slipped onto his lips as he scoffed. “Your lies are as terrible as mine.”

I put my hands on my hips and frowned at him. “I wasn’t scared. I was-” I paused and bit my lip as my cheeks reddened.

Luca turned his face to me and lifted an eyebrow. “You were what?”

My cheeks grew warmer as I turned away from him and folded my arms over my chest. “I was angry at you for avoiding me so much.”

I heard him step closer, and he wrapped his arms around me. His lips brushed against my ear and his warm breath sent a hot tingle down my body. “I know you’re lying. I know what you’re feeling.” He softly nuzzled my hair and I had to bite my lower lip to suppress a soft sigh. “I feel it, too.”

I closed my eyes and let out a deep, shuddering breath. “Then let me in on what’s going on.” I opened my eyes and turned my head around to smile at him. “I’m your queen.”

He turned me around and cupped one of my cheeks in his palm. “We’ll finish our search here, and then I’ll show you the whole truth. I swear it.”

I snorted. “Another graveyard reference? I’m starting to think you’re a little morbid.”

He grinned. “Our cemeteries have some... interesting residents, but I’ll tell you about that later, as well.”

We set to work examining all the drums, but at the end of a half hour we had found nothing. I watched with a furrowed brow as Luca shut the last of the cases. “How do these things lock, anyway? I mean, didn’t that... key thing just wedge the glass apart?”

Luca turned to me and shook his head. “The key not only pries the glass apart, but extracts the magic used to seal the cases.”

I tilted my head to one side and studied the infinitesimally small gap between the pieces of glass. “Do they need to put it back?”

He shook his head. “No. This type of magic is renewable. To recreate the lock, one needs merely to lay the pieces of glass back together.”

I righted my head and lifted both eyebrows. “That is... incredibly cool.”

He smiled and offered me his hand. “I have something cooler to show you.”

I took it, and together we strode from the hall. A crowd of visitors passed us, and some paused to gape at him. Whispered words passed between them.

“Is that her?”



“I think it is!”

“She’s so pretty!”

I blushed under the compliments. Luca leaned close to me and lowered his voice. “They’re not wrong.”

I cast a playful glare up at him. “Don’t think you’re going to win any points until you tell me what’s going on.”

He chuckled. “You’ll see in a moment.”

We exited the east wing and came into the lobby, but we didn’t move toward the front doors. Instead, Luca led me to the rear of the foyer. I did have time to notice that Mia cast a look of worry over us before we disappeared from view. Bookshelves and large display cases hid the rear wall, but we rounded a large shelf and were presented with a huge tapestry some forty feet wide and twenty feet tall.

Luca swept his arm over the expansive cloth. “This is my descent.”

The tapestry showed a grand tree with a single source at the top. I didn’t need to be an historian to guess that the names and dates denoted Luca’s ancestors and relatives. A crest hung above the tapestry and featured a dragon as the centerpiece, with a few inscriptions in an arch above the beast’s head. The dragon wasn’t alone, however, as a dove lay in its single upturned claw, and the pair faced each other.

I swept my eyes over the ornate cloth and whistled. “You’ve got a pretty impressive family tree.”

There must have been hundreds of names on the list, but I couldn’t help but notice something strange about them. I stepped closer to the tapestry and brushed my hand over several of the many names that didn’t have anything below them. “There’s a lot of people here who didn’t have kids.”

Luca moved to stand by my side and a sorrowful expression played across his face as he studied the names beneath my hand. “Unfortunately, that is true. My bloodline is... unique.”

I leaned back and inspected the rest of the tapestry. A pattern emerged that made me frown. “Why do all the lines die out three generations after they branch out from the main line?”

A bitter smile slipped onto his lips. “You have a keen eye that enhances your beauty.”

I snorted. “Flattery will get you far, but it doesn’t get me an answer.”

He pointed at one of the offshoots. "The lines branch out only until the third generation because my family is incapable of bearing children with the people of this realm beyond that generation."

I blinked at him. "Mating with the people of this realm? Your people?" I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. "That doesn't make any sense."

Luca sighed. "Nor does it to us, but that's what we've come to learn. In order to continue with the line beyond the third generation we must fetch a human from your world, and only one of those of the main line are allowed to do that, barring unusual circumstances."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Like when the main line was overthrown?"

He nodded. "Exactly that. Most often the king had no children, being of a singularly unstable mind and unwilling or unable to fetch a human from your world."

"Do the queens have to fetch a human guy from my home?"

He shook his head. "The women we fetch from the other world bear us only sons."

I couldn't help but remember what he'd told me in the east wing about that bearing. "About that bearing part. If you're supposed to be keeping away from me, then what's stopped you from-um, us-that is-" My cheeks blushed brighter than an exploding dwarf star.

A slight smile touched the corners of his lips. "The suppression of my dragon self by the Bane has allowed me to control my more feral nature." The humor disappeared as he pursed his lips. "But I don't know what will happen when it returns. I may be able to control the urge, or I may not." He turned his face away and there was a pensive look in his eyes, as though he was searching inwardly. "Even now I feel it rising up."

I turned to him and folded my arms as a grin slipped onto my lips. "Sounds like I need to douse myself in Bane perfume until the wedding."

A strange, wild look slipped into his eyes. I retreated until my back hit the tapestry wall. Luca set his hands on either side of my head and leaned in. His voice was hoarse and held a more growl-like timbre than before. "I wouldn't like that."

His musky scent wafted over me, and it awakened within me a strong sensual desire to touch him. I tamped down the urge and swallowed the lump in my throat. "Y-you have to get a hold of yourself, Luca. We can't do anything in-" He leaned closer and brushed his warm lips against my neck. I closed my eyes as a warm shudder ran through me. God, I wanted his touch so badly.

A soft growl emanated from his throat. His hands slid down the tapestry and grasped my hips. He pressed his body against mine and

captured my lips in a long, passionate kiss that ignited an erotic hunger inside me. I whimpered as he drew away. The flames of passion burned brightly in his eyes, but as I watched he used sheer force of will to tamp out that forest fire.

Luca turned his face away and shut his eyes. He clenched his teeth, and I couldn't help but notice that they were a little longer than they should have been. Luca took a deep, shuddering breath and his whole body relaxed. He pushed off from the wall, releasing me from his capturing arms, and half-turned away from me.

"I'm sorry."

I shook off my own carnal desire and clapped my hand on his shoulder. "You don't have anything to apologize for. It's not your fault your dragon self wants to-well, um, mate with me."

"I can guess your search did not go well."

We spun around to find Mia standing at the end of one of the long bookcases. Luca turned to her and shook his head. "No."

Mia folded her arms over her chest. "There's only two hours left until dark."

Luca nodded. "That's enough time for me to return Diana to the castle and see if the searches by the guards have come up with anything."

Mia's eyes flickered over a group of visitors who were approaching us from the left. "Would you like me to close the museum and initiate a search?"

Luca sighed. "Yes, though you won't be blamed if nothing comes of it before the hour."

Mia nodded. "We will do our best. My only regret is I cannot give you more help."

He smiled and shook his head. "You were a great help to Diana, and for that I'm eternally grateful to you. Besides, perhaps Sfetnic would know to what it refers." Luca himself didn't sound convinced of his own words, but he turned to me with that unfaltering smile and offered me his hand. "Shall we?"

I nodded and accepted his hand. Mia watched us go with a hint of trepidation on her otherwise stoic face before she lifted her hands over her head and clapped them together. "Attention, everyone! The museum is temporary closing!"

We passed through the gawking crowds and out into the dwindling sunlight. I couldn't help but feel my own little bit of dread at the sight of the sun disappearing beneath the horizon.

A quick look up at Luca with his gaze on the bright orb told me he felt the same. I gave his hand a squeeze. "Maybe your guards have found something?"

"Maybe." He didn't sound convinced again. I wasn't.

We hurried past the curious eyes of the tourists and citizens, and Luca guided us onto a side street. He swung me into his arms and his wings spread out behind him. A high leap and we were in the air, though he flew low over the city rooftops.

I couldn't help but admire and awe at the vast variety of peaks and spires that dotted the metropolis. The rooftops were like a city unto themselves with the different classes, species, and cultures spread out in a lawn of metal, thatched, and terracotta ground.

A question from Luca startled me from my reverie. "Do you like it?"

I gave him a wry smile. "You mean as myself or as your queen?"

"I'd like it to be both."

I folded my arms over my chest and snorted. "I'm not exactly queenly material. You took me from a pub, remember?"

He grinned. "And never has a woman smelled lovelier than with the scent of good food and drink on her."

I laughed. "You obviously didn't try any of the cooking there."

Luca chuckled. "I was afraid the food would... negatively affect my ability to officiate the race up-"

Something hurtled up from the ground and exploded just in front of us. Luca reined himself in as green dust sprinkled the air around us.

I inhaled some of the horrible scent and my eyes widened. "Dragon's Bane!"

Luca shuddered as the powder rained down on us. Another object was launched from the ground, and I beheld a small can with a string attached to the bottom. At nearing us the string was pulled out and the can exploded, emitting more powder.

Luca flew back, but his wings faltered. We dropped several feet in an instant, but Luca spread out his wings and slowed our descent. We glided over the rooftops, and I caught a glimpse of our foes. There were half a dozen of them standing about a short metal pipe with a few holding more

of the grenades. They weren't dressed in the attire of sailors but were clothed in close-fitting black garb that showed off their prime physiques. The people wore soft black shoes and gloves over their hands, and the little bits of hair that peaked out from under black bandannas was also all coal-black, no doubt courtesy of a dye. Masks covered the lower half of their faces, and all their eyes were completely devoid of color, showing only their large black pupils.

Luca glided into one of the nearby alleys and nearly tripped on the landing. I half jumped out of his arms before he staggered against the wall. The familiar pain of our bond struck my heart as he clutched his hand over his own. His wings shriveled against his back before they disappeared, and with them the pain also vanished.

Luca grabbed my hand and pulled me down the alley. "This way!"

We stumbled along, both weary from pain and my own ignorance of the city causing me to hesitate in such unfamiliar surroundings. Luca led us across a wide street and into another block. I looked over my shoulder at the street and my heart dropped into my stomach.

The six shadows, for I couldn't quite tell if they were real people, followed behind us atop small discs made of darkness. The saucers allowed them to float a few inches over the uneven ground, and the distance between us was quickly shrinking.

Luca stopped between a pile of wooden crates and pushed me to my knees. "Hurry!"

With my face only a foot from the ground I could see what he meant. There was a hole in the ground about two feet wide. Mold surrounded the lip of the hard stone entrance and a damp smell wafted into my nostrils. Luca grabbed the back of my collar and pushed me forward. I slipped inside over the mold and let out a scream when I found myself sliding down a small tube into the unknown.

A quick splash behind me told me Luca had followed suit, but I couldn't see anything but a dim light at the end of the water slide. Pipes above my head allowed more water to drip down over me, greasing the pipe beneath me in questionable-smelling water.

The light grew brighter until I burst out of the mouth and ran in a mesh of rope. It was shaped like a cobweb and I thrashed about for a moment before the bottom opened and I dropped onto a few inches of water. The water flowed over a concrete-hard floor and ran over my arms and legs.

I looked up and gaped at the spectacle before me. The pipe had dropped me into a large room some fifty yards long and nearly as wide. Columns thicker than I was tall sat on pedestals and held up the fifty-foot tall ceiling. All the stone had been carved from white stone that, with the gently flowing water, made the whole room sparkle. The source of the light were a few miscellaneous torches that somehow weren't extinguished by the damp air.

Luca's voice brought me out of my stupor. "Look out!"

I whipped my head back and watched him slide out of the pipe. He became enmeshed in the rope, and I took that short interlude to scramble out of the way. I hugged one of the columns at the same time Luca splashed down where I'd dropped. He climbed to his unsteady feet, and I hurried over to loop an arm around one of his and lean his weight against my side.

"Where are we?" I asked him, and my own echoing voice replied back.

“The city cistern,” he told me as he nodded at an elevated walkway at the rear of the room. The walkway ran down the left side of a dark, arched doorway that led deeper into the shadows. “We need to go that way.”

I adjusted his weight and helped him forward. “I just hope it’s only us going that way.”

We splashed through the cistern pool and onto the stone-hewn walkway. The path took us on a slightly descending path. I couldn’t make out the walls, but there was no scent of mold or mildew. A light at the end showed the way and after a twenty-yard walk we emerged into another cistern pool. This one was smaller, and the walkway branched out to our right and left. Arched doorways were situated in both those walls, and another ahead of us.

Luca looked to and fro and pursed his lips. A slight murmur came from him. “Damn it...”

Some of the color drained from my face. “You don’t know which way to go?”

He shook his head. “I can’t recall.”

Movement to our left caught my eye and forced my attention in that direction. My heart skipped a beat as two of the masked people floated into view. Two others came from the right, and a slight hissing noise at our backs made me look behind us. The silhouette of the sixth attacker blocked the light from the first cistern pool. They floated closer to us and forced us into the pool while the others also closed in.

I stood shivering in the shallow water as they surrounded us. Luca drew out of my grasp and held his head high as he met the empty gaze of our foes. “Who are you?”

A few soft chuckles came from the black-clad people. I could tell a few of them were women, but any other defining characteristics beyond that was impossible.

Luca’s sharp eyes darted over them. “We know Trulio didn’t send you. Who did?”

The one that had stepped out of the doorway opposite us lifted their hand. While I couldn’t see the lower half of their face, their soulless eyes and brow told me they held a certain amount of enjoyment at the fear in my face. Our other foes tensed, and at the drop of the hand, they sprung at us. Luca wrapped his arms around me and shielded me with his body.



A rock flew out of the darkness to our right and crashed into the face of the lead springer.

The masked fellow was thrown back by the force of the stone, though the others leapt out of his way to prevent being taken, as well. They landed around us on their feet, and all whipped their heads toward a column close at hand. A small man hung from the ceiling by a rope wrapped about his waist. He sported a long beard and bushy eyebrows, and his clothes were baggy and tightened at the waist by a belt. Curly hair stuck out from beneath his cap at odd angles, and he sported a badge in the shape of a column on his chest. The rope from which he hung disappeared into a small hatch in the ceiling that had been camouflaged to look like the rest of the stone.

The dwarf, for what else could be down in this cistern, held another rock in his hand and scowled at the masked people. “You want another one? Huh?”

The leader pointed their ring finger at the newcomer. One of their cohorts drew out a dagger and cut the tip of their finger. They flung the blood down and created one of the black discs beneath them which levitated them out of the water. Our masked foe darted upward toward the strange little man.

The dwarf let out a yelp and tugged on his rope. He was yanked upward, dropping the rock which clattered down the column. The ninja-looking person swiped their dagger at the man but missed by a curly hair.

As the shadow dropped Luca picked up the rock and slammed it into the side of one of the other masked people’s faces. I felt a rush of pain in my chest as he darted to the next one, barely missing them by a hair as he used his supernatural dragon speed. The whole party leapt back except for their fallen compatriot who lay soggy in the water.

The leader’s eyes glared at us as they raised their hand. They snapped two fingers together and the remaining four foes, leader included, rushed us.

A whole rock farm came tumbling down upon their heads. I looked up to see a dozen dwarves hanging from the ceiling and their hands full of rocks of all sizes. Bags were slung over their shoulders and held a large supply of stony ammo.

“Get on wit ya!” the dwarf from before shouted as he threw a rock at one of the black-clad people. The stone hit them in the calf. “Get out of

here or we'll hit ya agin!"

The leader ducked a blow from a heavy rock and clapped their hands together. Together with another of the ninja people, they created the shadow discs beneath them while the other two did the same. The pairs each picked up their fallen comrade, and they took off down two of the hallways. I breathed a sigh of relief.

That is, until Luca's legs buckled. The stone dropped from his shaky hand, and he dropped to his knees in the shallow water.

"Luca!" I yelled as I rushed to his side. I grasped his arms and there was a definite tremor beneath them. "Easy there. Don't try to use your dragon stuff." His eyes closed and his head lolled back against the stone column. My heart nearly stood still. "Luca? Luca!"

The roped dwarves were lowered and the first one to attack our black-clad foes untied himself before scurrying over to us. He knelt on Luca's other side and pursed his lips. "He's not dead, but he's not looking so good, is he?"

I couldn't keep a tremor out of my voice. "I-is he going to be alright?"

He nodded. "Yep, but we'd better git him going."

"Going where?" I asked him as the other dwarves formed a circle of curiosity around us.

The dwarf grinned. "No need to fear anything, Yer Queenliness. We're just taking ya to our 'office,' that's all."

I pursed my lips as I swept my eyes over the many bearded faces. "But we haven't found the key yet."

The dwarf stood and shook his head. "That's not our business to care about the gate." He lifted his gaze to the dwarves around us and thrust his fist into the air. "Is it, boys? We fight to keep the caverns the beauties they are!"

The other dwarves did the same with their fists and cheered as one. "Yes, sir!"

Their leader dropped his arm and his smile softened at me. "You both look like you could use a stiff drink, and then we'll get you out of here and to the castle."

I looked down at Luca. His breathing was slightly ragged, and he clenched his teeth.

I closed my eyes and nodded.

I now had a problem on my hands as I looked over Luca's stiff, heavy form. The lead dwarf clapped a hand on my shoulder. "No need to worry about that, Yer Queenliness. We'll handle him." He looked over his shoulder and used a hand to beckon to the others.

They sloshed through the water and hefted Luca onto their shoulders. The crowd marched him to a bunch of the ropes that hung from a large hatch, and together they tied them around his body so he hung in a sling. The leader dwarf put two fingers in his mouth and gave a whistle that echoed all over the cistern. The ropes were hauled up and Luca disappeared through the ceiling.

The dwarf tapped me on the arm and pointed at two ropes slung together to create a swing. "Here's yer carriage, Yer Queenliness."

I walked over and eased myself onto the ropes. The dwarf whistled again, and I was pulled up. I had a fine view as the dwarves scrambled to wrap the remaining ropes about their waists. The leader strolled over to his rope but paused long enough to grab something from the water and tuck it into his belt beneath his vest. Some of the dwarves were shorted, and they glared up at their comrades as they and I disappeared through the ceiling.

The large room above the cistern had columns in the same locations but was thankfully dry. I had failed to notice how wet I'd become in the shallow water, and a sudden chill made me shiver. Another dozen dwarves stood around the room, and at their backs were backpacks filled with stones and rope.

I blinked at all the heavy gear and tiny men. “Are you guys always up here?”

“Not here exactly,” the lead dwarf admitted as he strode over to where his men were setting Luca into a couple of backpacks turned into an improvised stretcher. “We just got the jingle that somebody was down here and checked it out to find you facing off against those shadows.”

“The jingle?” I repeated as I hurried to join him at Luca’s side. His breathing wasn’t quite as ragged, but his eyes were still closed.

The dwarf fingered some loose rope that hung out of one of the stretcher bags. “Yep. You got caught up in one of these nets on the way down, didn’t ya?” I furrowed my brow before I recalled the spider’s web. The dwarf returned his attention to Luca and nodded. “Now then, let’s get His Highness to bed and get some strong food into him. Take him away, boys!”

The dwarves hefted the stretcher onto their broad shoulders and marched off down the left-hand tunnel. The lead dwarf grinned at me and jerked his head in that direction. “This way, Yer Queenliness.”

I followed behind the strange procession and was glad that more torches illuminated the area. While the cistern had been devoid of everything but columns and water, evidence of life littered the upper floor. Literally. Bags sat in odd spots and half-eaten meals were scattered about.

“Do you guys live here all the time?” I asked my guides as we passed another bag with provisions.

“Well, it is the Ponds,” the dwarf pointed out as he walked by my side. “And we’ve got to be guarding it on behalf of our king and our promise.”

The tunnel opened into a completely new, green world. Vines grew down through cracks in the ceiling and wrapped themselves around the columns. Carpets of grass covered the floor and flowers dotted the green blades. The soft, large petals reminded me of tulips, though they were all nearly closed at the top.

The walls were decked in early vintage vine, and countless rows of planters stretched from one corner to the other. They were filled with every imaginable vegetable, and some I had never imagined. The dwarves resided in small stone huts with thatched roofs, and each peak of the houses only reached to my height.

I swept my eyes over the wondrous sight and breathed out a single word. “Wow.”

The dwarf puffed out his chest and grinned. "Pretty nice, isn't it? Took a century, but now we hardly need to tend to it. The water all comes from pulling up the stuff from the cistern beneath us and piping it through the stone ceiling above us. Now let's get His Highness over here."

The 'over here' was a small hut built with a column sticking out of its center. The dwarves marched inside, and I followed. The interior was short, but comfortable, with rooms separated by a single stone slab. I was forced to stoop to clear the front door and decided crawling on my hands and knees inside the house was the best option.

They carried him into the room to our right, and I found that to be the bedroom. Some clothes were scattered about and there was a dresser on the opposite wall. The bed sat in the middle of the room with a nightstand beside it closer to the door. The dwarves set the stretcher on the floor and tried their best to fit Luca, but he was two feet too long for the bed.

"That's good enough," the dwarf leader spoke up as his men tried to bend Luca's legs into the bed. "Keep trying that and he's going to be eating his knees."

The men stopped their efforts and shuffled out of the room, taking their bags with them. The leader marched over to the bed and forced open one of Luca's eyes.

The dwarf frowned. "A nasty hit with something."

"Dragon's Bane," I told him as I crawled into a corner, though I kept my focus on Luca.

His face looked almost peaceful now, and I no longer felt any pain in my heart. I set my hand over my chest and pursed my lips as I thought back to his struggle to keep us aloft and get me down the pipe. He'd done all that to protect me when it was more than likely my fault those things were chasing us.

The dwarf turned to me and studied me for a moment before his eyes lit up. "What now, where are my manners?" He crossed his arm over his chest and swept into a bow. "Dapper, at your service, Yer Queenliness."

His introduction made me smile. "And I'm Diana."

Dapper righted himself and grinned. "A fine name. Quite a fine name, in fact. And what were you two doing down here without the key?" I recounted my tale, and when I had finished some of his humor had faded. "Sounds like a real mess you've got up there, and these black folks are in the middle of it."

“You’ve never seen them down here?”

Dapper cupped his chin in his hand and scrunched up his bearded face. “Well, I won’t say that, but we’ve been getting jingles on the net, and when we got there, sometimes they’ve been cut and sometimes not.”

He reached into his belt and drew out what he had removed from the water. It was the dagger from our attacker. Dapper turned it over in his hands and studied the blade which I noticed had a unique jagged edge where there appeared to be waves from the hilt to the sharp tip. He grabbed a rope from near at hand and sliced the strand in two with a simple flick of his wrist.

Half of the rope fell to the floor, and he examined the other half that he held in his hand. “This looks like the same cut in the ropes.”

I returned my attention to Luca and my shoulders drooped. “That doesn’t help us help him.”

Dapper tossed the rope away and looked Luca over before he shrugged. “I think he just needs some of his kingly sleep.” He turned his face toward me and examined me. “You could use some, too.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Neither of us has time for sleep, not until we find that key.”

Dapper tossed the dagger onto the nightstand and stroked his beard with one hand. “There’ll be trouble for sure if it isn’t found, and only two hours of sunlight left, too.”

I swept my eyes over the room. “How can you tell?”

Dapper dropped his hand and turned to me with a grin. “Ya wanna see?”

There was a mix of dread and curiosity as Dapper strode out of the room and I crawled after him. He stopped at the column and turned to me before rapping his knuckles against the stone. “This shows me.”

I blinked at him as he pulled on a short bit of rope that hung off the column. The pull opened a secret compartment inside the column and revealed a hollow space. Inside was a mirror that reflected the sky far above us. I crawled up to the opening and gaped at the miracle of mirrors as clouds drifted past.

Dapper puffed out his chest. "My great-great grandfather carved that out a century ago just to tell the time according to your measurement."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "How do you tell the time?"

He nodded at the door. "By the blooming of the flowers. When they're closed its time to sleep, and when they're open its time to work."

My heart sank as I realized the late hour. "The day's almost gone..."

Dapper's smile faltered a little, but he clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Chin up. It's not over yet, and I'm sure His Highness will be up and about in no time to get you finding that key."

I nodded, and my bobbing head happened to look to my right at the dividing wall between the entrance room and bedroom. I hadn't noticed before, but some pictures had been carved into the stone wall. The stone was divided into three unique rectangular scenes, each one very different from the next. There was a scene of hunting a wild boar, of a dwarf scurrying away from a human with a bolt of lightning in his hand, and another with a dwarf lifting up a mountain.

Dapper grinned as he set his palm against the stone and admired the carvings. "My family's always been curious about the Upland. My great

grandmother was fond of the stories from up there, so she had my stone carver granddad make this up.”

I furrowed my brow as I studied the lightning-bearing dwarf. “Who’s this?”

Dapper tucked his thumbs into his belt and puffed out his chest. “That’s an ancestor of mine, or so the legends say. He had the balls to go stealing the lightning god’s thunder.” He let loose a great, jiggling laugh. “Musta been kind of sore for him to be trudging around with all that thundering and drumming about him!”

My eyes widened and I whipped my head around to face him with my mouth agape. “Drumming?”

He frowned at me as he gave a nod. “Aye, that’s what’s all that noise after the light show. Something wrong with that?”

I clasped one of his hands between mine and looked him square in the eyes. “You have to get me to the museum.”

His cheeks blushed so red they made his brown beard appear white. “W-what’s this about? What are you talking about?”

I stabbed a finger at the stone picture. “The key! I think I know where it is, but you have to get me to the museum!”

Dapper blinked at me. “What’s this now? What are you talking about?”

I squeezed his hand. “You have to take me to the museum! I’m begging you!”

His confusion softened. “No need to be begging me, Yer Queenliness. I’ll get you there right now.”

“And I’m coming with you.” The voice came from the bedroom.

Dapper and I hurried to the room and found Luca half out of bed, though that could have been because he didn’t fit in the first place. His face was pale, but there was a smile on his lips.

I scrambled over to the bed and pressed my hands against his chest. “The only thing you’re doing is laying here.”

He grasped one of my hands and pressed a kiss on the fingers. A light blush accented my cheeks as he met my eyes. “I’m coming.”

“Well, whoever’s coming where had better get out of my house and follow me,” Dapper spoke up as he hitched up his pants. “This key isn’t going to be found with us standing here jabbering our jaws off.”

He strode from the room, but I cast one last uncertain look at Luca. “You sure you want to come with us?”



He pressed my hand against his chest over his heart. "With you, always."

I swore he had access to a switch that turned on my blushing cheeks, but I shook off the red and looped my arm under one of his. "Come on then. Time to get out of bed and save your city's water supply."

The house was even shorter for Luca, and we both crawled our way outside where Dapper impatiently waited for us. He jerked his head toward the back of the small village. "It's this way."

I looked where we'd come from and where he wanted us to go. "But that's the opposite direction of the museum."

"It's a shortcut, now let's git on wit it."

He strode forward, and we could do nothing else but follow. Dapper led us down another torch-lit tunnel and we came out on a hall without houses, but with corrals. Small horses and cows grazed in their respective pens, and a shepherd watched over each.

Dapper stopped at a ladder attached to the wall to our right, and he nodded at the hatch at the top. "This'll take us to the highest floor." He began the long climb.

Luca swept his arm toward the rungs and smiled at me. "Ladies first."

I snorted and gave him a light push toward the ladder. "You just want to enjoy the view. Besides, you look as weak as a kitten and if you fall, I might be able to hold you up."

It scared me a little when he didn't argue, but instead climbed up after our friend. We soon ascended through the hatch and into another large, low room, but the ladder continued upward to the next floor. The scent of dirt and voices came to my ears, and the stone floor here was covered in a layer of dust. Carts rolled by overhead as Dapper grabbed the single torch that illuminated the low room. The ceiling was so short that Luca and I were forced to crouch as we followed the dwarf to our right where a culvert-sized tunnel led us backward.

We passed through several rooms and a few pipes that I imagined one of which we'd used to descend into the dwarven domain. After a half hour of walking Dapper stopped us at another short ladder that led upward.

He half-turned to us and handed me the torch. "Lemme see if it's safe."

"You mean because of the black clad people?" I guessed as he grasped the rungs.

He shook his head. "No, from people stepping on our heads."

Dapper climbed the short ladder and opened the hatch only slightly. His eyes darted across the crack of light that appeared before he looked over his shoulder at us. "Alright, it's clear, but hurry it up."

Dapper flung open the hatch and a square of light shone down on us. I blinked against the bright illumination as he climbed out of sight. Luca drew me to the ladder first and I climbed up. I peeked over the edge and found myself staring at the bottom of a display case. Dapper helped me out and Luca followed.

The dragon king arched an eyebrow as he looked around. I recognized the location as the west wing. "I didn't know there was an entrance in the museum."

Dapper grinned as he shut the hatch. The seam matched that of the rest of the stone marble slabs that made up the floor. "We made it during the construction."

"Your Highness!" The shout came from our left where Mia came out of a long row of tall display cases showcasing armor. She hurried over to us and gaped at our group. "What's going on?"

Luca shook his head. "There's no time to explain. Has the exhibit on myths been searched yet?"

She shook her head. "No. We started the search in the west wing in hoping the thieves had hidden it around its case."

Luca took my hand and we hurried past her. "Wait for me!" Dapper shouted as he scurried after us with Mia close behind.

We hurried through the dozens of museum staff who lifted their heads at our passing and crossed the lobby to enter the eastern wing. Mia beckoned to her staff, and they followed. The statue of the god of thunder occupied a prominent spot in the center of the first room. Our group of followers now totaled over thirty.

Luca turned to them and pointed at the god of storms. "Search every case that pertains to Bronte." The people nodded and spread throughout the exhibit.

I lifted an eyebrow as I sidled up beside Luca. "Bronte?"

Dapper strolled up to us, though his red cheeks showed he was slightly winded from keeping up with our long legs. "The name of the thunder god."

Mia joined us. "What's going on?"

Luca nodded at Bronte's likeness. "Diana thought of something we missed, that perhaps the 'drums' to which Trulio alluded to weren't literal, but-

A shout came from one of the people who inspected the statue. "Your Highness!" We hurried over with Luca in the lead. The museum worker pointed at the back of the god's spear just below the highest zig. A hole had been chipped into the stone. "Something's there!"

Luca stretched his arm up and slipped his fingers into the small hole. He furrowed his brow as his fingers searched, and a moment later his eyes lit up. Luca drew his fingers out and clasped between two of them was a strange shell with key teeth. He lay the object in his open palm and smiled down at it. The shell was half green and half blue and had a beautiful shine that glistened in the sunlight. The four 'teeth' that stood out of the top, two from each color, were stubby and hinted at being as unusual as the key to the glass cases.

I was hesitant to ask. "Is it-?"

Luca nodded. "Yes. The key to the gate."

Dapper grinned. "Well I'll be. Is that what it looks like?"

Mia half-turned toward the doorway and the windows that looked out on the waning day. "And not a moment too soon."

**L**uca grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door. “I thank you greatly for all your efforts. Now if you’ll excuse us, we have a city gate to save.”

“I’m coming, too!” Dapper shouted as he scurried after us.

We hurried out of the room and soon exited the front of the museum. The area was crowded with dozens of disappointed people who looked forlornly at the shuttered museum. At our exit, however, squeals went up from the crowd and Luca was mobbed. I was trampled.

“Your Highness!”

“What an honor!”

“Can you sign my shirt?”

I would have snorted if I hadn’t been in the middle of a push fest created by the over-eager fans of the dragon king. Our joined hands were ripped apart in the surprise attack and I found myself floating adrift in a sea of admiration. A small, firm grip grabbed my hand and tugged me out of the crowd. When we broke free, I was glad to see it was Dapper who had guided me.

Mia appeared on the steps of the museum and clapped her hands. “Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies!”

Nothing worked. Dapper shoved two fingers into his mouth and let loose a whistle that ripped through the twittering of Luca’s admirers. I myself, standing so close to him, had to clap my hands over my ears. The people paused in their fawning and peppering of questions and turned to see who had blasted their eardrums.

Mia slightly bowed her head and smiled at him. “Much obliged.”

Dapper folded his arms over his broad chest and shrugged. “Don’t mention it.”

Mia returned her attention to the curious visitors. “The museum is once again open, and the first ten people may enter the private wing at no charge.”

The crowd stampeded toward the museum entrance, and Mia slipped inside to avoid being crushed as I had been. The lobby was large enough to accommodate all of the stragglers, and in a few moments the all-clear was given by Luca who beckoned to us.

We hurried over and he snatched my hand, though he took enough time to smile at Dapper. “You have the impressive voice of your halls.”

Dapper grinned. “You should hear me deep in the halls of His Highness. Nothing like it.”

I glanced at Luca and lifted an eyebrow. “What was that about a private wing, anyway?”

“The rear of the museum holds some of my family’s precious jewels,” he explained as we hurried along the street toward the gate. “Visitors must meet certain ‘trust requirements’ in order to view the collection.”

We wove our way through the streets and soon neared the gates to the Ponds. A low murmur indicated the crowd had increased in size, and as we took a shortcut through an alley, I could see the throngs of people that congregated before the entrance. The great crowd in front of the gate stretched down the street and past the mouth of our alley. Just a few short steps and everything would be set right.

And then a wall was thrown up in front of those steps. That wall was made up of three of our black-clad foes who floated down from above via their hovering black discs. The other half appeared behind us, trapping our group in the narrow alley. Luca pulled me behind him and against the wall.

The leader stepped out from the others and held out their hand to me. My eyes flickered from their palm to their face, and I glared at them. “Hell no.”

Luca swept his narrowed eyes over the dark figures. “You will not have her to kill.”

The leader dropped their hand and chuckled. The dark mirth echoed over the quiet of the alley and sent chills down my spine. The leader lifted one hand and pressed their fingers together to snap us straight into trouble.

I didn't have the voice of Dapper's halls, but I cupped my hands around my mouth and took a deep breath. "Hey, everyone! His Highness is over here!"

A dozen heads whipped around in our direction, and the familiar wide eyes of surprise and glee appeared. The standing crowd turned into a wave of curiosity as they spilled into the alley. They were slow, like a mammoth uncertain that the call had been from friend or foe, but at catching sight of Luca their pace quickened.

Our three adversaries closest to the mouth of the alley flew up and out of sight. The leader grabbed me from behind and dragged me backward toward the remaining half of the group. Dapper snatched up a thick leg of a discarded table and swung it like a bat at the same time the crowd descended upon us.

The black-clad person closest to him flew up, but he spun in a circle and launched the leg at them. The thick wood hit them square in the gut and felled them from their strange vehicle where they crashed to the ground.

I wasn't so lucky. My captor avoided the throngs of curiosity seekers, and the five of us with my unwilling self flew up to the rooftops. A sharp pain in my chest made me look down. Luca stood in the midst of his admirers with a look of death in his eyes. His hands had morphed into long claws, and I knew the next moment he would, against the horrific pain, force his wings out.

I grabbed one of the arms of my captor and clamped every one of my teeth down on their flesh. Even their thick black garb couldn't stop the sharp bite of justice as my fangs sank deep into their skin.

When they spoke, I realized it was a woman, and her voice was like the gravely hiss of a snake. "You little bitch!" My response was to swing my leg upward between theirs and connect my ankle with their feminine crotch.

They jerked us backward in pain and surprise, and we crashed into another of the disc riders. The discs vanished beneath our feet, and we plummeted toward the ground. Two of the other riders picked up their fallen foe, and the fifth tried to grab me, but Dapper threw broken pieces of the rest of the table at them.

Luca pushed his way through the crowd and caught me in his arms. The people cleared the area around us and one of them started clapping.

The rest joined in, including a few exuberant individuals who took to whistling.

“Do it again!” someone shouted.

That’s when I realized they thought my kidnapping had been a spectator sport. I grinned up at Luca. “Let’s not do it again.”

He lifted his eyes to the sky and shook his head. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about that.”

I followed his gaze and realized the air space above us was empty. Our foes had fled, at least for now.

Luca set my feet on the ground and lifted his hands above his head. The people quieted. “Thank you so much for joining my queen and me on the eve of our joyous day. We would like to invite you to the official opening of the gates, if you would all be so kind as to make a path for us.”

Visitors and citizens alike pressed themselves against the narrow walls of the alley and created a path for us. Luca offered me his hand and a smile. I accepted, though not before Dapper squeezed out from the legs of the packed peoples. “Yer not getting rid of me that easily!”

Dapper followed behind us as Luca and I led the crowd to the main road. We soon arrived at the majestic gates where the wizened old man I’d seen earlier was still hunched over the lock. At our jubilant coming he looked up, and never had I seen such a wrinkled old face. His whole countenance appeared to be an ocean of folds, and a bulbous nose stuck out from the wavy mess. Deep-set, sharp dark eyes stared back at us with annoyance, and bushy eyebrows only made them appear more sunken. Their leather tool bag still sat at his feet, and in one hand was a strange wand-looking stick and in the other he clutched a skeleton key.

At the sight of us, those bushy eyebrows crashed down like an ancient oak in a windstorm. “What’s all this hubbub about? I’m trying to work here!”

Luca drew the key from his pocket and held it up for the old man to see. “Your work is over, though it doesn’t go unappreciated, Sir Seilu.”

Seilu wrinkled his nose, but eagerly picked up his bag and stepped out of the way. “Just get the key in there before that oaf ruins a perfectly good lock spell.”

I was about to ask what he was talking about, but a hard slam of a fist from the other side of the entrance rattled the whole door. The quake was followed by thunder.

“Let me out!”



**T**he voice was deep and male and seemed to bounce off stone walls located on the other side of the gate. Seilu stabbed a bony finger at the strangely shaped lock that was situated in the center of the two halves. “Hurry and shut him up! He’s been nagging at me all day like that!”

Luca stepped up to the lock and set the shell key into the shallow hollow. The four key teeth at the top stretched upward and inserted themselves into corresponding tiny holes in the gate halves. I could hear clanking as they worked their magic through a dozen locks before a loud one donged like a church bell.

Luca grabbed my hand and drew me back as Seilu scuttled with us. “Some space would be advisable.”

I couldn’t understand why as the groaning gates opened inward until I saw the behemoth of a man on the other side. The shadow stood ten feet tall, and their cloak billowed out on both sides, encompassing most of the entrance. He stepped out into the dwindling light and revealed a round face with a stubby beard and sharp eyes. His hair was the color of a raging wildfire and his skin the pigment of sandy dirt. He wore tight pants and a shirt, and a necklace of gold and precious jewels hung around his neck. A crown of the same variety topped his head like a boulder of gold amid a wildfire.

King Glimlach Plas XXVI opened his wide arms and gave us a broad smile that could have swallowed me whole. “I have arrived!”

Luca stepped forward while I hung back. He smiled as he crossed his arm over his chest and bowed to the great man. “And my city welcomes you, King Glimlach Plas XXVI. May your jewels never fade, nor your moss never cease to grow!”

A cheer rang up from the crowd, and people clapped and whistled. The King of the Ponds sauntered over to me and crouched low so we were face to face. His grin widened the more he studied me, and his eyes twinkled as he turned them to Luca. “A fine queen you have here, King Silvanus. She has the light of the sun in her eyes and the touch of mischievous humor you changelings and humans so admire.”

Luca’s admiring eyes settled on me, and I blushed under his attention. “I couldn’t agree with you more, Your Highness.”

“Now then-” King Plas stretched to his full height and his humor fled as he frowned. “How did the key come to be stolen and who stole it?”

Luca’s eyes flickered over the crowd. “That would be better spoken about in more private quarters.”

King Plas stepped to one side and swept his arm toward the gate. A line of torches hung from either side of smoothly carved stone walls and led down a flight of wide steps and into the earth. “Then let me invite you into my domain.”

A noise behind us made Luca and me look in that direction. I noticed the crowd at the back part, and a line of soldiers marched through. The guard I’d seen earlier in the castle led them, and I vaguely recalled that Luca had called him Tybalt.

The soldiers reached us, and Tybalt bowed his head. “We have come to return you to the castle, Your Highness.”

Luca arched an eyebrow. “Word travels fast.”

Tybalt raised his head and drew a folded paper from his cloak which he handed to Luca. “No, Your Highness. We received a note from Miss Smith at the museum that you would be here.” Luca unfolded the note and I leaned against him to read it.

YOU WILL FIND His Highness at the Gate. Please fetch him and remind him that he cannot always protect his lady and himself on his own. - Eunomia Smith

I FINISHED my silent reading with a snort and smiled up at Luca's touch of annoyance. "She knows you."

"So it would seem," he mused as he tucked the paper into his pocket. "And the advice is not without merit." He turned to King Plas and bowed his head. "I'm afraid we cannot yet except your kind offer, Your Highness, but as for your questions, they will be duly answered at the castle at your convenience."

King Plas wrinkled his nose. "Very well. After the procession I will ask my questions." He turned his attention to the onlookers and raised his hands above his head. "Tomorrow, we feast and celebrate this new queen, and I will bring the ale!"

A greater cheer than before rose up from the crowd. The king of the dwarves turned and took a step toward the gate but paused and turned his head just enough so one of his eyes settled on us.

He spoke in a whisper so low I barely caught the words. "Watch yourself, Silvanus. If half the rumblings in my domain are true, then your troubles are more than they appear."

Luca pursed his lips but bowed his head. "I thank you for the warning."

Plas nodded his head and sauntered into his domain. The gate shut loudly behind him, and the door was resealed by the strange key.

Luca took the key and handed it to Tybalt. "Keep this and see that it is placed in the vault."

Tybalt clasped the key tightly in his gauntlet-covered hand and nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. Will you be returning with us?"

Luca offered me his hand and a smile. "I believe we will."

My aching body was overjoyed when I grasped his hand and nodded. "Definitely."

Luca led our procession through the curious onlookers and down the winding streets to his majestic castle. The gates opened and Sfetnic met us in the courtyard.

He bowed his pale, wizened head to us. "I am glad to see you both returned, Your Highnesses."

"As are we," Luca returned as he tilted his head back to look up at the grand keep. "Is everything prepared for tomorrow?"

Sfetnic nodded. "It is, but the security needs your attention."

Luca pursed his lips. "Later."

Sfetnic lifted an eyebrow but backed up and bowed his head. "Yes, Your Highness."

Luca led me past the adviser, who cast a strange look at me. I was a little unsettled as Luca guided me up the maze of stairs, though there was no small relief when we soon arrived at the top floor. Too soon.

I paused at the top of the final stairs and looked over my shoulder. Luca smiled at me. "Has Sfetnic explained the stairs to you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but he had to touch the wall."

Luca pointed at his feet. "As a member of the royal family I have the privilege of merely needing to touch the floor for the castle to accept my route through its halls."

"Your family tree is really... unique," I mused as we continued on our way.

His good humor faltered a little as he stared straight ahead, and I noticed he tightened his grip slightly on my hand. "Yes."

I frowned at him. "There's something wrong."

He lifted an eyebrow at me. "Is there?"

I rolled my eyes. "Listen, I can tell when something's wrong with you. The wrinkles around your eyes get tight."

Luca was so surprised he jerked to a stop and set a hand on one side of his face. A chuckle escaped his lips before we moved forward. "I'll have to remember that and apply some cream."

"And tell me what's worrying you," I added as we reached the doors.

Luca opened both of them and gestured with his hand into the interior. "I will answer any and all of your questions inside."

I pursed my lips but strode past him and plopped myself on the foot of the bed. Luca closed the doors behind us and turned to face me. I noticed a flash of feral light in his eyes before it was tamped down. Now I had my answer to one of my questions.

The Dragon's Bane was wearing off.

Luca moved to stand a few feet in front of me, and he clasped his hands behind his back. “What do you still wish to know?”

“When does this procession thing take place?”

“Tomorrow at midday.”

I couldn’t help but wince. “And you really think those guys won’t try again to kidnap me?”

Luca pursed his lips and shook his head. “I’m not sure, and because of that you’ll remain in the castle until the procession.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t that be an invitation for them to try again?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “All their efforts have been in the dark, out of sight of the public eyes. Confronted with the risk of being seen by the public, they fled. We may count on that to protect both of us from any further attempts, at least until after the procession.”

“So, what’s this whole procession thing about? What happens during it?”

“You walk from the castle to the Cloister of Reflection where King Plas presents you with the symbol of your ascension. From there we return to the castle and have a grand feast.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “That sounds a little too easy.”

A smile touched his lips. “My predecessors wanted as little pomp and circumstance to avoid stress on their new queen.”

I recalled what he had told me earlier in front of the tapestry tree. “Because they all come from my world.”

Luca nodded. "Yes."

I let out a sigh that seemed to blow out a lot of my energy. My aching body reminded me of the long day I'd had, and my clothes still had a touch of salty scent to them. I looked around and my eyes fell on a large dresser to my left.

I stood and shook my shirt between two fingers. "Is there any way I can get out of these?" The heated gaze in Luca's eyes told me I'd asked the wrong thing. My eyes flickered to the door and back to the dragon king. "Didn't you say something about us being kept separate until the procession was over?"

With great effort Luca turned his face away from me, but the smoldering look in his eyes didn't go away. "Yes."

I wasn't born yesterday. The look in his eyes told me he had one thing in mind. I slowly rose to my feet and grasped one of the bed posts in my hand.

Luca predicted my move, and the next moment he stood in front of me. His warm gaze seemed to scald me with a soothing, sensual heat. He grasped my upper arms in a gentle but firm grip and drew me against him. The warmth of his muscled body spread through mine and sent shivers of delight down me.

I let out a deep, shuddering breath before I looked up into those blue-green, hungry eyes. "Luca?"

The reminder of his name seemed to tame some of the hardier lust in his gaze, and he blinked a few times. His shoulders drooped a little and his grip on me loosened slightly. "I'm... I'm sorry."

I reached up and cupped his cheek in one hand as I smiled up at him. "Don't be." I stood on my tiptoes and pecked a teasing kiss on his lips. "I want this, too."

The heat in those beautiful eyes returned. He swooped down and captured my lips in a long, passionate kiss. His hands slid down my body, exploring me with all the hunger of a starving man. I leaned into his touches and the kiss, enjoying both as the sensual warmth filled me with ecstasy and longing.

I hardly noticed as my pants fell to the floor and my shirt became unbuttoned. My swelling breasts strained against my bra as one of his hands brushed up to tease my nipple. I groaned into our kiss, and his reply was a deep, feral growl. He broke from the kiss and nuzzled my neck as

his hands wrapped around me, pulling me tighter against him. I gasped at the hard, hot bulge in his pants, and instinctively rubbed my hips against his.

He grunted and jerked against me. My breath came out in quick, sharp gasps as he fumbled with my bra. I couldn't help but smile as I reached behind and undid the clasp, letting my bra fall loosely in front of me. Soon that joined my pants on the floor, along with my shirt. His clothes, too, were thrown aside and our hot flesh rubbed against each other.

I noticed that his fingers had lengthened into short claws, and his ears were now pointed. My own body reacted in a similar manner as my hips expanded and my breasts squeezed against the firm muscles of his chest. I wrapped my arms around him as his hands stroked my body, eliciting small mewls of pleasure from me.

In one swift motion he lifted me into his arms and carried me over to the silken sheets of the bed. He lay me atop the covers and draped his hot body over mine. His warm manhood pressed against my hot, wet opening, teasing me with promises of sensual pleasure. I wrapped my legs around him and captured his lips in another passionate kiss as he slowly eased himself inside me. His thick manhood stretched my walls and stroked my pussy, sending a rush of hot desire through me.

He pinned me to the bed and rocked his hips against mine, moving in and out in a perfect rhythm that sent me into a hazy wave of pleasure. I clutched onto him and groaned as he slowly increased his speed, his throbbing member pushing deeper and deeper inside my wet body. Our soft pants filled the room as our hunger for one another grew to an intensity that both frightened and excited me.

The agonizing bliss built up higher and higher. My body trembled as little orgasms started between my legs and spread through my body. I closed my eyes and groaned. He quickened the tempo. I could feel it coming. Our sweat-soaked bodies rubbed together, creating delicious friction as I clung to my mate.

"Oh God," I groaned as the orgasms grew stronger. He thrust harder and faster, penetrating me with a wild abandon. He was my world, my desire, my pleasure. "Oh God! Oh God, yes! Yes!"

Light flashed in front of my eyes as I came. My body trembled as wave after wave of orgasm rippled through my body. He continued to thrust

inside of me, lengthening my wonderful pleasure until he spilled his seed inside me.

Luca collapsed beside me and drew me against his chest. Our harsh breathing was all that transpired between us for a few minutes before I let out a sigh. “Wow.”

“I concur.”

I cuddled against his warm chest and closed my eyes. “So, what other perks does a dragon’s mate get?”

He chuckled and the sound reverberated through me. “You’ll see.”

But I wouldn’t see that night as the long day and fun night caught up to me. I breathed a deep sigh as I slipped into a blissful sleep.



When I awoke the next morning, I found myself alone in the bed. My heart didn't have time to drop as the reason for my awakening, a knock on the door, came again.

"Diana?"

I sat up and wrapped the blankets around myself as I blinked at the door. "Pennae?"

"Yes. May I come in?"

I whipped my head to and fro, and finally spotted my discarded clothes. "Y-yeah, one second!"

I leapt off the bed and into the clothes, and in a few hurried steps I opened the door. Pennae stood there with a clothes hook held high in one hand. The article itself was covered by a thick white cloth. She couldn't have had a prouder smile on her face. It beamed so bright I was nearly blinded by it.

Pennae thrust the hanger and its contents at me. "It's here!"

I blinked at her. "What is?"

"Your dress, silly!" Pennae explained as she swept past me and stopped in the middle of the room to turn full circle. Her eyes grew larger as she looked over the quarters. "How beautiful!"

I joined her and grabbed her shoulders to stop her spinning. "What's this about a dress?"

"I made you your dress!" Pennae explained before she paused and wrinkled her nose. "Well, we did. Ethan helped by drawing out some ideas I had in my head, and I stayed up all night to make it!"

Pennae flung off the covering and I beheld a beautiful white wedding gown, complete with a long train and veil. Pearls had been sewn into the puffy cuffs and on the border of the veil. The bosom was made of lattice with flowered designs stitched across it. When Pennae rocked the dress in her outstretched arms the material shimmered like fish scales.

Pennae smiled up at me. "What do you think?"

I had to shut my mouth before tears sprang into my eyes. "This is... this is for me?"

Pennae grinned and bobbed her head. "Of course, silly! Who better to show off my first really original design but the first friend I made in the city?"

I leapt forward and wrapped my arms around her in a tight hug. She held the dress as far away from both of us as possible. "It's beautiful!"

Another knock came from the door. We parted like the Red Sea, and I wiped my tears of joy away before turning to the door. "Who is it?"

Mia's voice floated through the doors. "I was told some help would be required."

Pennae sheepishly smiled at me. "Ethan must have told her how complicated the dress was."

I lifted an eyebrow before returning my attention to the entrance. "I think we could use all hands on deck."

Mia slipped inside with a mischievous smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes. "To be honest, I had to see this dress of which Ethan is so proud, and which involved so many books from the archives."

I blinked at her. "What books?"

Pennae shrugged as she showed off the outfit to Mia. "I wasn't sure what past dresses looked like, so Mia let me see sketches of what other queens had worn for their wedding."

Mia grasped the bodice before giving a nod of approval. "And this will make a fabulous addition to that wonderful collection, but now we must hurry. The procession will start soon."

The two of them went to work, and in a half hour I found myself bedecked in the fabulous dress. I wanted to spin in a circle, but the train bogged me down and I was unaccustomed to high heels. Mia opened the doors while Pennae took up the train.

I took a deep breath and walked forward. The dress was as light as a feather, and I felt as though I drifted over the stones. Sfetnic waited for us

at the top of the first flight of stairs, and a soft smile lit up his pale face. He pressed his hand against the wall and bowed his head to me. Magic spread down the stone wall, and I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. No dozens of staircases in those high heels.

My entourage followed me down the steps to the foyer where the staff stood in two lines on either side of me. They smiled and bowed their heads, and I blushed beneath their attentions. Luca's old nursemaid stood beside the closed doors with a large bouquet of flowers in her hand which she handed to me.

Her eyes sparkled as she grasped my hands and looked me in the eyes. "You are a beautiful bride, little miss, and make sure to keep that young man in line."

I could only nod before I was led to the doors. Trumpets blared outside, and I couldn't help but be nervous as the crowds grew louder. My hands shook so much that the bouquet rattled.

Pennae set a hand on my shoulder and smiled at me. "You have nothing to be afraid of. They're going to love you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and managed a shaky smile of my own. The doors creaked open, and sunlight spilled onto me. I blinked against the harsh light before I was blasted by the noise. It sounded like the whole of the city had turned out to see me. The people crowded about the open gates and gawked at me, their eyes admiring and curious. I stepped out into the courtyard and was presented with a line of armored guards. They wore plates over their chests and gauntlets that resembled dragon claws over their hands.

Pennae gave a slight tug on my train. I got the hint and took a deep breath before I walked forward. The soldiers turned to face ahead and marched along at my side to keep back the pawing hands that wanted to touch my dress. I put on my best smile and bowed my head at as many people as I could without my head falling off from the effort.

Cheers and whistles followed my procession down the wide street. Murmurs swept through the crowds, and more than one made me blush.

"How beautiful she is!"

"The king will be happy with this one."

"I wish my old woman was half that nice." That one was followed by a hard thwack from said woman.

I walked down the long road and thanked whatever gods were in this world that I didn't trip even once. Mia and Pennae followed, and together we arrived at the Cloister of Reflection. The doors had been thrown open and I could see a pile of white-packaged gifts covered all the walls. King Plas stood before the mirror, and he held in his hands a beautiful crown of silver with jewels of every imaginable color inlaid around the band.

Cassius stood outside with one foot on the short steps. He wore a simple silver cloak and formal attire, and as I passed, he smiled and bowed his head.

Luca stood to one side in front of Plas and was decked out in military garb much like that worn by his soldiers. Atop his head, however, was a crown of his own, bedecked as the one in Plas' hand but with a scarlet-colored felt cap whereas the silver one was open like a tiara.

Luca's eyes sparkled as I came up to him and he offered me his hand. "You look stunning," he whispered as he turned so we both faced Plas.

Plas held up the crown and the chatter at our backs was silenced. "We gather ourselves here to pay homage to this union of two lines now joined as one! May they live long and prosper so that many others will prosper under their light!" He lowered the tiara crown onto my head and the crowd erupted in cheers.

I couldn't believe it. I was a queen now.

Plas lifted his hands above his head and grinned. "All hail King Silvanus and Queen Diana!"

Luca leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to my lips. "What does it feel like, Queen Diana?"

I snorted. "I'll tell you when I believe it."

He swept his arm over the vast number of gifts stacked about the room. "Your subjects believe it and have sent gifts to show their happiness for us."

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open. A laugh erupted from those closest to the building who had somehow managed to overhear our conversation through the din of celebrations. "All of them?"

Luca chuckled. "Yes, and you have the honor of choosing the first present to open."

I swept my eyes over the presents and situated close to the doorway. Everyone down the procession way would be able to see me open that one. I hurried over and lifted the square box in my hands. A single red ribbon

decorated the top like all the others, and held the lid closed. I pulled on the ribbon, and the bow came undone and floated to the floor.

My heart pounded as I eased open the lid. The whole of the city hushed.

Something moved inside it. I let out a scream as a mass of dark shadow flung the lid off and flew at me. I threw my arms up in front of me, but the black light passed through them and struck me in the stomach. The force threw me backward off my feet. Luca leapt into my path and caught me in his arms. The shadows disappeared inside me, and I let out a cry as a horrible pain squeezed my insides.

Screams erupted from everyone as Luca lifted me in his arms. He spread his wings and leapt into the air, flying over the frightened citizens as the soldiers tried to disperse them in an orderly manner, much like herding terrified cats.

The pain shifted inside me like someone was using a cold instrument to push my organs around. A trembling gasp was all I could manage as my body stiffened against the agony.

Luca's trembling voice broke through my pain. "Hold on."

We landed on the balcony as we'd done before and hurried inside. Luca raced up the stairs and soon we were in our bed chambers. He hurried over to the bed and lay me atop the covers. "Hold still."

"No... problem," I wheezed as my whole body stiffened from the agony.

Luca tore my shirt open, and his eyes widened. A dark circle with strange markings covered the front of my stomach.

Sfetnic appeared to float through the open doors and stood behind Luca, his face paler than I recalled, though admittedly I was in such pain that my vision was somewhat blurred. "What happened?"

Luca shook his head. "I don't know. Some dark cloud burst out of one of the presents and attacked her."

"Allow me."

Luca reluctantly stepped back and Sfetnic took his place. The magician tapped one of his sharp nails against my stomach, though I hardly felt the pain as he pricked me. He lifted the tiny speck of blood to his lips and flicked his tongue over the blood. The next instant he spat out the blood on the ground and curled his lips back.

Luca's face paled. "What is it?"

Sfetnic glared at the mark on my stomach. “A binding spell of the blackest kind. The concoction is born of unicorn blood and Dragon’s Bane.”

The pain slightly receded, or at least enough that I swallowed the lump in my throat before asking the question on everyone’s minds. “Binding what?”

Sfetnic pursed his lips. “So long as this curse is in your body, you are unable to bear children.”

**M**y jaw dropped open. “What?”

A dark cloud settled on Luca’s brow as he balled his shaking hands into fists at his side. He clenched his teeth, and I couldn’t help but notice, in my waning pain, that they were more like fangs. “God damn them.”

Sfetnic lifted his sorrowful eyes to my face. “What the enemies of His Highness have done is made you unable to perform your most basic duty. That is, to conceive a child and continue on with the bloodline.”

“But we can get this lifted, right?” I wondered as I glanced between the two. “I mean, every curse has a way to be broken, right?”

Luca turned his attention to Sfetnic. “Well?”

Sfetnic folded his arms and sighed. “I must admit this curse is one of which I am unfamiliar, and I would venture to guess that it is a new creation concocted specifically for our queen.”

“But can you lift it?”

Sfetnic shook his head. “Not without knowing more about it. If I attempted to lift the curse, I may well kill the child within her.”

I again had to pick my jaw off the bed. “Come again?”

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. “Yes, Your Highness. You are with child.” His eyes flickered to Luca. “The babe is admittedly at a very early stage, but dragon children grow quickly inside the womb and so I detect something stirring within you that has the essence of you both.”

I set my hand atop my stomach or tried to. Touching the curse runes was like touching a hot iron. I jerked my hand back and glared at the

strange markings. “There has to be a way to lift this.”

Luca stepped forward and grasped my hand. “And we will find that way.”

“Your Highnesses!” Mia shouted as Pennae and she hurried into the room. They stopped at the foot of the bed and swept their eyes over the dour faces. “What happened?”

Luca sighed. “The queen has been cursed with infertility.”

Pennae’s hands flew to her mouth. “How horrible!”

Mia’s eyebrows crashed down. “The museum and its vast volume of books is open to you at all times, Your Highness.”

Luca turned his attention to Sfetnic. “Would you be so kind as to begin the search for this curse, or its origins, should it indeed be a new breed.”

Sfetnic bowed his head. “At once, Your Highness.” He turned and hurried from the room.

Mia stepped back and bowed her head, as well. “I will see that he is well-supplied.” She disappeared after the adviser.

Pennae moved over to the other side of the bed and sat down to wrap her hand around one of mine. “Is there anything else we can do?”

I sheepishly grinned at her. “If you could forgive Luca for ruining your beautiful dress.”

She smiled and shook her head. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

Luca caught Pennae’s gaze. “If you would leave us for a moment.”

Pennae’s face drooped, but she stood and nodded. “Of course. If you need me, you have my feather.” She left, closing the door behind herself.

A tense silence fell between us. I scooted up to lean my back against the headboard and looked down at my blackened stomach.

“I’m sorry.”

I whipped my head up and blinked at Luca. “What?”

Luca closed his eyes and hung his head. “This is my fault. I should have expected another attack, but I let my hubris interfere with my better judgment and put you in this danger.”

I grasped his hands in mine and gave them a squeeze. “Now you listen to me, Mr. Dragon King. This isn’t your fault.” Luca dared lift his eyes a little to mine and I smiled at him. “You’re not the one who cursed me, and it’s not your fault I have these crazy cloaked people after me. They would’ve attacked anyone you brought over.”

He chuckled. “That hardly sounds better.”



I grinned and shrugged. "It's all I've got, but this still isn't your fault. Now-" I pushed him away and swung my legs over the side of the bed. "When can the bride get a piece of her wedding cake?"

A wide grin slipped onto his face before he swooped down and pressed our lips together in a passionate kiss. I broke it up just to get some air, and to tamp down the wonderfully delicious amount of blush on my cheeks.

Luca swept me into his arms and carried me toward the door. "Right now."

A horrible thought struck me. "Not yet!" I stabbed a finger at my ripped dress. "Where's Pennae?"

"Coming!" came the shout through the door, and Pennae swept into the room with needle and thread in hand.

Luca set me down and Pennae went to work sewing the seams he'd torn open. I looked over her head at my groom. His face was downcast. I reached over and gave his hand a squeeze.

"We'll fix this," I assured him with more hope than I felt. "And we'll find who did it and smack them so hard their ancestors will feel it."

That garnered a smile from my husband, and my spirits were somewhat lifted. We would find out how to lift this curse because there was a life depending on us to do just that.

We just had to.

## A NOTE FROM THE FLYNN

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## CONTINUE THE ADVENTURE

Now that you've finished the book, feel free to [check out my website for the rest of the exciting series](#). Here's also a little sneak-peek at the next book:

### SEDUCED BY THE DRAGON KING:

"I'm not made of glass."

The scolding came from me and was directed at the dragon king who helped me down the stairs of the castle. He had grasped one of my hands and wrapped his arm around my waist, nearly carrying me over the steps.

"Your legs are weak from your time in bed."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't remind me. Another four days and I would have traded my crown for a handful of dirt I could inhale like a five year old."

Luca watched my feet like a hawk watches its next meal. "The doctors thought it best."

My good humor faltered a little as I looked down at my stomach. It was covered by a new set of clothes made especially for me by my bird friend, Pennae, but the cloth couldn't block out my mental image of the curse markings that tainted my front. Those damned markings kept me from fulfilling my queenly duties to this handsome dragon man at my side.

I shook off my black thoughts and looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Where are we going again?”

“To the museum,” Luca reminded me as we made it down the first flight of stairs. “Sfetnic has some information he personally wishes to convey to us.”

A familiar face in the form of Cassius appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He paused with his foot on the bottom step and smiled up at us. “There you are. I was just seeing if you needed some help with your beautiful bride.”

I snorted as I tried to wriggle free of one of Luca’s helpful hands. “I have a little too much help already.”

Cassius stepped to one side to allow us to pass. “Tybalt is waiting for you in the courtyard, and a contingency of his guards will follow you to the museum.”

Luca glanced at our friend as we passed him by. “What have your searches of the castle library found?”

Cassius followed behind us and shook his head. “Nothing, I’m afraid. Outside of physical and magic binding spells, black magic with the ability to bind such an innate ability as child bearing was completely unknown to our ancestors.”

Luca pursed his lips. “Then we’ll have to rely on Sfetnic for good news.”

Cassius stopped at the bottom of the next flight of stairs and bowed his head. “Know that I won’t give up, good cousin. We will find the source of this curse and the culprit, and deal with both of them. If you will excuse me, I will continue my search among the personal libraries in the city.” He bowed again before he hurried off.

As I watched his retreating back I couldn’t help but wonder about something. “Does Cassius have wings, too?”

Luca nodded. “Yes, though because he is of the third descent from the main branch they are weak and incapable of bearing his weight.”

My face fell. “That must be frustrating.”

Luca shook his head. “He finds solace in his magic, which admittedly is far more than I could ever hope to do.”

“So how does that work?” I asked him as we made our way down the last flight of stairs. “Your line gets wings and he gets magic?”

“In essence, yes. Magicians have surmised that the blood of the lesser branches, rather than reproduction, focus its strength on enhancing the magic within them so that they at least have a way to survive the harsh world until their line falters on the third generation.”

I winced. “Can’t he get a bride from my world?”

We reached the entrance hall and Luca sighed. “Unfortunately, the Glass of Caelum won’t allow any but those of the first branch down to the nephews of the lesser branches to pass through its portal. “

My face fell. “Damn. . .”

Luca gazed down at me with a soft smile. “You have a big heart, my mate.”

I blushed at the term of endearment. “Flattery will get you a lot of places, but I’d like it to get us to the museum at a quicker pace than you leading me like I’m about to turn into a puddle of bones and skin.”

He chuckled as he looked ahead of us as the front doors were opened out into the courtyard. “Tybalt will give us a quick escort.”

Tybalt stood at the head of a group of a dozen other guards with one hand on the top of the hilt of his sword. An elegant carriage was parked behind them, with four white horses and a white-clad coachman atop the box. The family crest featuring the dragon figured prominently on the doors.

Tybalt bowed low to us as we approached. “Good morning, Your Highnesses. We are ready to leave whenever you desire.”

Luca lifted his gaze to the sky and frowned. “Has anything been seen of the masked people?”

Tybalt shook his head. “No, Your Highness, nor has anyone taken responsibility for. . .” His eyes settled on my stomach.

Luca nodded. “Understood. Now if you would escort us to the museum.”

Tybalt bowed his head and swept an arm toward the carriage. “It would be our pleasure.”

We had a flashy escort in the form of the armored guards atop their horses. This was the first time I'd seen the city in four days, and I continued to marvel at the many different styles of buildings and different people who called the metropolis home. Avius and other changeling species walked past, chatting away with each other and normal humans. Carts rolled by hauling lumber, crates, and fruit, most of which I couldn't identify.

The people gaped at us, but the soldiers stopped any autograph seekers. We soon arrived at the museum, and climbed out. Mia appeared in the doorway and met us halfway down the steps where her brother sat beneath the warm sun.

Ethan smiled and tipped his cap at us. A pile of sketches sat by his side.

Mia bowed her head. "It's a pleasure to entertain both of you once more, Your Highnesses."

Luca looked past her and at the open doors. "Has anything been discovered?"

Mia pursed her lips. "That would be better explained by your adviser. He's this way."

She led us to her office where we found the usual disarray that ran in the family, but no sign of Sfetnic. For a moment I worried that one of the stacks of books had toppled over his skinny frame and flattened him. That is, until Mia swept away some paperwork on the floor behind her desk and grabbed a small metal ring with one hand wrapped around a clasp. She pulled on the metal ring and a secret hatch opened in the floor. The hatch revealed a set of narrow wooden stairs and air so stale a mummy's wrappings would be jealous.

Mia climbed down the stairs and for the first time that day I was glad for Luca's extra hand as he helped me down the steep decline. The stairs led ever downward some twenty feet below the floor level of the museum and into a whole new, dark world. A few torches illuminated enough of the space for me to tell that we stood in a huge room with dividing walls, but with plenty of bookshelves. Every inch of available crumbling stone wall was covered by the cabinets, and stand-alone bookcases covered the rest of the floor.

No torches hung from the walls, and the whole place was shrouded in a darkness so deep that I couldn't see my nose in front of my face. Mia set the torch in a hanger on the stair wall and took up a covered lamp from an end table beside the steps. She led us deep into the tall stacks of ancient, musty tomes.

A soft noise came to my ears, and I realized it was the sound of pages being turned ahead of us. I strained my eyes to see another light in that direction, but nothing came to my sight. We rounded the last stand-alone bookcase and the lamp illuminated an open space where a hefty table stood.

The light also illuminated Sfetnic. He sat at the table hunched over a thick tome.

He also sat in complete darkness.

At our coming his eyes flickered up, and the light reflected off his great black orbs. My heart skipped a beat before he returned his attention to his reading. "My apologies for not standing, Your Highnesses. The pages on this ancient treatise are fragile, and the longer the spine is strained by its own pages the more likely the whole of the book would fall apart."

Luca nodded. "We understand, but have any of them proven useful?"

With a speed I could only envy Sfetnic read through the final four pages and eased the cover shut. I noticed the cover was of some kind of leather, wrinkled by time and the dry atmosphere. The binding itself was made of small metal rings the color of hard rust.

Sfetnic stood and set his bony hand on the cover before he nodded at us. "Yes, Your Highness. This tome is a compilation of the knowledge of one. . .man. He wrote about a certain spell used to seal away stolen souls. I believe this is our best lead in finding a cure to Her Highness' troubles."

Luca cast a curious look at the tome and lifted an eyebrow. "The apparent age of the book doesn't give us hope that the author is alive."

A strange, bittersweet smile slipped onto Sfetnic's lips. "The author is still among us, Your Highness, though he hasn't been alive for over five centuries."

Mia frowned. "Then a vampire?"

Sfetnic nodded. "Yes."

My eyes widened. "Vampires are real here?"

Luca folded his arms over his chest and nodded. "Yes. Real, and often very inhospitable to guests, if they can be found at all."

Sfetnic turned his face away from us and frowned. "I know where this vampire resides."

Luca's eyes widened. "You do? How?"

"Because he is my Master."



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